

Sample Communications with the School Community about a Sudden Death

In any crisis, the initial information you provide to the school community (faculty, staff, students and parents/guardians) must be accurate and to the point.

Accurate

Make sure the details have been verified with the authorities. Remember, your job is *not* to review the circumstances of the death—that’s usually up to law enforcement. Your role is simply to alert the school community to the tragic loss. As time goes on, information about the death will circulate, especially on social media. It can be helpful for you to remind members of the school community that rumors and gossip are rarely accurate.

To the Point

Keep it simple, short, and straightforward. This is the information you want to communicate:

1. A student died (*when*), under tragic circumstances.
2. The school offers its condolences to all who have been personally affected, especially to the family of the deceased.
3. The school has a crisis plan that it will be following to guide the school community through the next several days.
4. Trained resource staff are in place to assist all members of the school community in dealing with this sudden, tragic loss.

As you review these suggestions, you’ll see that they address the postvention elements of providing control, support, and structure. Remember, you want to deliver these announcements in written form—either through memo or e-mail. The formality of communication is essential to making sure everybody not only gets the same message but also can review the contents if necessary.

Remember, too, the developmental needs of the students in deciding “which” students need “what” information. For example, as a general rule, although the death of a student in an elementary school setting will probably concern all the parents/guardians in the school community, it may not affect all the students. So while you will definitely want to notify all the parents/guardians of the death, you will probably not want to make an announcement to all the children unless the death has received extensive media coverage.

Here are examples of communications that illustrate these points.

Announcement to Faculty

I received very sad news early last evening that Rob Duffy, a member of our junior class, died yesterday afternoon under tragic circumstances. I know you join me in sending kind thoughts and condolences to Rob's family and friends and all the members of our school community who will be personally affected by Rob's death.

Our crisis team is already implementing our crisis management plan. We will begin this morning with an emergency faculty meeting to review the plan, provide resources to assist you in dealing with student reactions, and assess your needs for continuing support. Please meet in the cafeteria at 7:20 a.m.

Announcement to Students

(To be read by faculty in homerooms)

I have some sad news to share with you. As some of you may have heard, Rob Duffy, a member of our junior class, died suddenly yesterday afternoon. I know you join everyone in the school community in sending out condolences to Rob's family and to all of us who knew him and will miss him very much.

I know you may hear a lot of rumors about what happened to Rob, but I encourage you to remember that not everything you hear is necessarily true.

A sudden death can be a very upsetting experience, and some of you may want to talk to someone about what happened. Members of the school crisis team will be available all day for everyone in our school. If you feel like you want to talk to them, for any reason, please let me know, and I will make that happen.

Announcement to Parents/Guardians

Our school received sad news yesterday when we learned of the sudden death of Rob Duffy, one of our juniors. The administration, faculty, and staff at the school extend our condolences to the Duffy family and to all of you in the school community who will be affected by Rob's death.

Our school crisis plan has been implemented. We will be providing support for your children. We will also have links to a variety of resources on the school's website that might help you better understand your children's reactions. We will be listing all of the community resources available to provide you with support. If you have questions or concerns or would like to talk personally with a member of the school crisis team, please call us at (*phone number*).

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