

# Public Schools Branch

## OPERATIONAL POLICY

| Memorials and Grief Support in Schools           |                         |
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| <i>Policy Section</i><br><b>School Community</b> | <i>Procedure Number</i> |
| <i>Pages</i>                                     | <i>Approved Date</i>    |
| <i>Reviewed Date</i>                             | <i>Effective Date</i>   |
| <i>Replaces:</i>                                 |                         |

### 1.0 POLICY STATEMENT

- 1.1 The Public Schools Branch (PSB) is committed to supporting school communities during times of loss with sensitivity, equity, and respect. Recognizing the profound impact of the death of a current student or staff member, the PSB ensures that memorial activities honour those affected, are guided by established principles, while maintaining schools as spaces focused on learning and well-being.

### 2.0 PURPOSE

- 2.1 To provide a guiding framework for memorial activities that balances sensitivity to the needs of grieving individuals and communities with the PSB's responsibility to maintain schools as welcoming, supportive spaces dedicated to learning.

### 3.0 SCOPE

- 3.1 This policy applies to all schools within the PSB and addresses the planning and management of memorial activities following the death of a current student or staff member.

### 4.0 PRINCIPLES

- 4.1 **Respect and Sensitivity:** Memorial activities shall reflect sensitivity to the needs and wishes of the grieving family and the broader school community, considering cultural, religious, and developmental factors.
- 4.2 **Equity:** The PSB is committed to equitable treatment in memorial activities, ensuring that losses are recognized with equal respect and dignity.
- 4.3 **Support:** Schools shall provide appropriate support to students and staff affected by loss, with access to counseling and other resources as needed.
- 4.4 **Learning Environment:** Memorial activities shall align with the primary purpose of schools as spaces for learning, ensuring they provide support and foster emotional well-being without creating lasting reminders that could intensify or extend the grieving process.
- 4.5 **Community Engagement:** Schools are encouraged to engage families and community members in planning memorial activities while adhering to the direction established by the PSB.

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## OPERATIONAL PROCEDURE

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Public Schools Branch recognizes that the loss of a member of the school community is deeply felt by students, staff, and families.
- 1.2 This procedure provides direction for planning and carrying out memorial activities and providing grief support within a school setting after a current student or staff member has died.
- 1.3 Memorial activities can be a healthy way to promote emotional expression and provide a sense of hope and recovery for those who participate.
- 1.4 It is important to actively include family members and students in planning any memorial activities.
- 1.5 Planning needs to be done within the parameters of the procedure and with great sensitivity for supporting the family and those impacted in the school community.
- 1.6 Any memorial activity in the school setting must be approved by the school principal.
- 1.7 A Memorial Committee can be formed for additional support and guidance.

### 2.0 DEFINITION

- 2.1 Memorials – Objects, physical markers, or activities to remember a deceased person or an event that resulted in death.
- 2.2 Memorial Committee – This committee provides support and guidance to a school community following the loss of a student or staff member. Chaired by the Director of Student Services or designate, it includes the respective school administrator and individuals appointed by the chair and school administrator.

### 3.0 PROCEDURE

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| Equity | It is important to approach the loss of a student or staff member with the same level of respect and care, regardless of the individual’s prominence within the school community. Differentiating responses based on the individual’s recognition may |
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|                       | <p>inadvertently send the message that some losses are more significant than others. Every loss is meaningful, and it is essential that all individuals are honoured equally.</p>  |
| Timing/Communication  | <p>It is recommended that one person be designated as the consistent contact between the school and the grieving family.</p> <p>Before any communications are undertaken, it is essential to seek the families’ permission to share information with the school community.</p> <p>The planning process should be approached with the utmost sensitivity, ensuring that the family’s needs and wishes are respected while also supporting the well-being of those impacted and the broader school community.</p>  |
| Flag                  | <p>Where there is a death of a current student or staff member the flag shall be lowered at that school, if practicable, to half-mast until the funeral/celebration of life concludes. Consult with the PSB when considering other situations.</p>   |
| Memorial Services     | <p>Memorial services shall be held off school grounds to allow space for the community to come together in a respectful way.</p> <p>If the funeral or celebration of life of a current student or staff member takes place during the school day, the school will cancel classes to allow students and staff the opportunity to attend and pay their respects.</p>   |
| Support               | <p>Support will be available at the school for those who need it during regular school hours.</p>  |
| Permanent Memorials   | <p>When considering a permanent memorial, it is important to weigh the potential impacts on the school community. While permanent memorials can provide a meaningful way to honour those lost, they may also serve as a continuous reminder of the event, which could be distressing for some individuals.</p> <p>Additionally, permanent memorials may face challenges such as vandalism or maintenance issues, which could compromise their intended purpose over time.</p> <p>For larger-scale events that affect the broader community, an established memorial should be in a location off the school premises. This approach ensures a shared space for reflection while minimizing any unintended impact on daily school life.</p> <p>For further guidance on permanent memorials, including alternative approaches, consult with the Director of Student Services or their designate.</p> <p>See section on <i>Additional Direction for Memorials</i>.</p> |
| Spontaneous Memorials | <p>Spontaneous memorials, such as flowers, photos, tokens, and cards, may appear after the passing of a student or staff member. It is important to approach these memorials with care and sensitivity, while also planning for how they will be managed. The timeframe for keeping a spontaneous memorial in place should be communicated thoughtfully and as early as possible.</p> <p>The school’s Crisis Response Team will review the memorial to ensure all notes and</p>  |

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|  | <p>tokens are appropriate and respectful. Memorial items will typically remain for up to two weeks or until shortly after the funeral or celebration of life. Families should be informed of this timeline and offered the opportunity to participate in removing the items or to receive them as a keepsake, if desired.</p> <p>See section on <i>Additional Direction for Spontaneous Informal Memorials</i>.</p>   |
| <p>Remembrance Journals/Letter Writing</p> | <p>A discrete and accessible area in the school can be arranged to have a memorial table. This might include a photo of the deceased and materials such as pens, markers, starter cards to allow students and staff to express their condolences and memories. Providing a journaling or card-writing station is a thoughtful way to support grieving students. This space can offer an opportunity to write or draw messages to the family, share special memories, or bring in meaningful pictures. Providing starter cards with prompts such as “<i>My favorite memory was...</i>”, “<i>_____ always made me laugh when...</i>”, or “<i>A special characteristic of _____ was that they...</i>” can help guide those who wish to participate.</p> <p>The cards and messages can be gathered over the course of a week and compiled into a memory book, along with any collected pictures, to be presented to the family as a heartfelt keepsake. To ensure the content is appropriate, it is essential for every message to be reviewed before delivery.</p> |
| <p>Social Media</p>                        | <p>It is important to handle announcements about the death of a student or staff member with care. Personal information about the loss should not be posted on school or PSB websites or social media pages.</p> <p>Be mindful of students creating social media pages in remembrance of the deceased. While these gestures often come from a place of compassion, they may need gentle guidance to ensure respectful and appropriate content.</p> <p>Following a large-scale event, it may be appropriate for the PSB to acknowledge the shared loss within the community in a manner that is respectful and supportive.</p>   |
| <p>Removal of Belongings</p>               | <p>In younger grades, a student’s seat assignment can be a delicate reminder of their absence. After the funeral or celebration of life, it may be appropriate to adjust the classroom seating arrangement. When making these changes, consider reconfiguring the entire seating plan to avoid singling out the absence. A class discussion, handled with care, can help students understand the thoughtful removal of belongings.</p> <p>Coordinate with the family to return their loved one’s belongings in a way that feels supportive to them. Families may choose to pick up items after school hours or have them delivered. These belongings should be gathered and kept at the main office, with delivery handled by a member of the counseling or administrative team.</p> <p>To ensure consistent and compassionate communication, designate one staff member as the primary contact for the family throughout this process.</p>   |
| <p>Commemoration at Graduation</p>         | <p>Commemorating those who have passed can play a meaningful role in helping the school community process their loss. It is essential to communicate closely with the family of the deceased to understand their wishes and honour them appropriately. Graduation ceremonies may offer a moment to briefly acknowledge and remember</p>   |

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|                                  | <p>those who are no longer with us, while maintaining the primary focus on celebrating the achievements of the graduating students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● If requested by the family, the Department of Education can award a high school diploma posthumously in the name of a student who was enrolled in high school entering or during their grade 12 year. (Refer to the Minister’s Directive for details).</li> <li>● Inform the graduating class in advance that this will occur, and include a note in the program, marked with an asterisk, to indicate that the diploma is being awarded posthumously. If the family wishes, a designated family member may accept the diploma during the ceremony.</li> <li>● Should a family member attend the ceremony, assign a staff member to greet them and provide support, ensuring they feel welcomed and included.</li> <li>● Avoid leaving an empty chair during the ceremony, as this can serve as a lingering reminder of loss rather than a celebration.</li> <li>● A moment of silence is not recommended, as the focus of the event should remain on honouring all graduates and their achievements.</li> </ul> |
| <p>Yearbook</p>                  | <p>When there is a death, the picture of the student or staff member can be displayed as commonly practiced in the yearbook.</p> <p>Rather than dedicating an entire tribute page, a simple reference to the deceased may be made in a respectful manner. For instance, in the closing section of the yearbook, a small memorial box (typically 3x3 inches) can be included, featuring a heartfelt phrase like "In loving memory," along with the individual’s photo, name, date of birth, and date of passing.</p> <p>This approach allows for a thoughtful acknowledgment while maintaining the overall tone of the yearbook.</p>   |
| <p>Special Reminders</p>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Be mindful of the family’s needs, considering developmental, cultural, and religious differences.</li> <li>● It is essential to respect the family's wishes and ensure they are informed about the procedures and options available.</li> <li>● Avoid holding a school-wide assembly to announce the death of a student or staff member. Instead, communicate the information in a more private and respectful manner.</li> </ul>  |
| <p>Handling Death by Suicide</p> | <p>Confirm with the family about what information, if any, they wish to share about the cause of death.</p> <p>Rather than establishing permanent memorials, consider temporary or non-renewable forms of remembrance, such as a donation to a relevant charity or funding a suicide prevention program. This approach is designed to help reduce the risk of suicide contagion and instead focus on healing and positive action.</p> <p>Offer support to close friends of the deceased, providing a listening ear and resources as needed. It is important that conversations emphasize hope and the possibility of recovery.</p> <p>If there are rumours or speculation about the cause of death, especially regarding suicide, encourage those affected to seek support, regardless of whether the death has been officially confirmed.</p>  |

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|  | <p>It is important to be on alert for unmonitored social media activity as harmful or negative comments related to suicide may be posted, or students who are struggling may express thoughts of self-harm online. It is essential to monitor these platforms with care and respond with appropriate support.</p> |
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**Additional Direction for Memorials**

| Best Practices   | Best to Avoid  |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Promote memorials that benefit others or have an education focus (donations to organizations, scholarships, community projects, books, programs, etc.) and that honour and reflect the individual(s) who died. For example:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If the person who died was an avid hiker - donations could be made to a local trail for upkeep.</li> <li>- If the individual had a love of reading - donations to the local library.</li> <li>- Charities that the family has identified.</li> <li>- Annual scholarships or awards from the family given to another student.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Allow for ample time to gather input from the family and the school community before making decisions, avoiding any sense of rushing to closure.</li> <li>● If, due to the nature of the large-scale event, there is a need for public recognition, ensure that it is placed off the school site and is hope inspiring.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Permanent memorials (e.g., pictures or personal items) inside the school: These can serve as constant reminders of the loss, which may hinder the healing process for both students and staff.</li> <li>● Naming a school or section of the school after an individual: This could establish a precedent that may lead to difficult decisions regarding future memorials and whether similar actions can be taken for others.</li> <li>● GoFundMe pages: While they may appear to be a helpful way to raise funds for grieving families, they can place additional stress on the family and the school, create pressure for community members to contribute, and raise concerns about transparency in managing and distributing the funds.</li> <li>● Planting trees or gardens: Although a thoughtful gesture, trees and gardens may not thrive or could require ongoing maintenance, which may cause distress to the family if they do not flourish.</li> <li>● Memorials prone to deterioration: Memorials that are susceptible to wear, or damage or vandalism over time may fail to serve as lasting tributes and could create additional burdens for the family.</li> </ul> |

**Additional Guidance for Spontaneous Informal Memorials**

After a loss, it is common to see temporary memorials made up of items such as flowers, cards, stuffed animals, posters, and other personal mementos. These serve as heartfelt expressions of sympathy and a way for the community to honour the individual and their impact. It is important to approach the closure of these memorials with care and compassion, ensuring that the process respects the emotions of those involved while setting clear and gentle boundaries. Think of it as a way of extending the kindness of a sympathy card.

| Best Practices  | Best to Avoid  |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Communicate early and clearly with staff, students, and families about the expected duration for displaying the memorial, so everyone is aware and prepared.</li> <li>● Memorials typically remain in place for a period of time ranging from one day to two weeks and are usually removed after the funeral or celebration of life.</li> <li>● It is helpful to keep the school community informed about what will happen with the items left at the memorial.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Removing or taking down memorials without first communicating the timeline to students, staff, and families.</li> </ul> |

### Additional Direction for Existing Memorials

In cases where existing memorials do not fully align with the Memorial Procedures, it is important to approach the situation with care and respect for the individuals and families involved. Schools should thoughtfully assess each situation, taking into account how much time has passed and the unique circumstances surrounding the memorial.

When appropriate, administrators may have discussions with the family and their Home and School to explore potential options. These conversations should be handled with compassion and sensitivity, ensuring that families feel supported and heard. The intention is not to remove or alter memorials without due consideration, but rather to ensure they continue to honour the individual in a way that aligns with the guidance of the Memorial Procedures.

In many cases, existing memorials can remain while schools and families work together to explore additional ways of honouring the memory of the individual in a way that is in keeping with broader guidelines.

#### 4.0 REFERENCES

- 4.1 Minister’s Directive - [Granting of Senior High Graduation Diploma and Transition Certificate in the English Language Education Program](#)
- 4.2 National Association of School Psychologists – PREPaRE Training (Handout 42 and 43)
- 4.3 Coalition to Support Grieving Students: [Commemoration and Memorialization Guidelines for responding to the death of a student or school staff](#)