

Public Advocacy



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Safe Messages

Appropriate communications can prevent copycat suicides

OVER A SIX-MONTH PERIOD THAT stretched into January, five students and one recent graduate from Ohio's Perry Local School District died by suicide, a staggering number that has left the community shaken.

The series of tragedies, which included three deaths by suicide during an 11-day period, drew national media attention and served as a stark reminder that districts need to have crisis prevention and "postvention" plans in place. For school leaders, understanding what to do and what to say to parents, students, community, and the media can help prevent the spread of contagion, or copycat, behaviors.

Fortunately, several tools are free

and readily available online to help schools. But first, let's look at some sobering statistics.

PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM

Reporting on suicides was one of the most difficult tasks I faced as a journalist. You always ask the question, "How much is too much?" You never want to add to the problem, and suicide is something that has rarely been discussed openly, given ongoing stigmas around mental health.

At the same time, we now understand that suicide is a public health problem. According to 2017 data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), deaths by suicide have increased

almost 30 percent since 1999. Reporting on it in a sensitive manner can help spur necessary conversations about mental health and can help encourage people who are vulnerable or at risk to get help.

This is especially true when dealing with minors. Between 2007 and 2014, the number of suicides among 10- to 14-year-olds doubled, and it is the second-leading cause of death for people between the ages of 10 and 34, the CDC reports.

The most vulnerable, according to some studies, are youth ages 15 to 19 who previously have been exposed to suicide. For them, the risk rate is two to four times higher than others.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) notes that more than 50 studies worldwide have shown that lurid or sensational news coverage can increase the likelihood of suicide for vulnerable people. Among the types of coverage cited: explicit descriptions of the method of suicide, graphic headlines or images, and repeated reports that glamorize a death.

This makes it even more incumbent on school districts to develop safe messages that are delivered in a "deliberate and consistent manner," according to *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*. The free guide, first published in 2011 and updated earlier this year by AFSP and the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, includes tools for working with the media, sample statements, and key messages for your district's spokesperson.

Among the tips and key messages shared in the guide:

- Developmental differences between students in elementary, middle, and high school grades must be part of your discussions when developing messages. Cultural differences should be considered as well.
- Adolescents are vulnerable to suicide contagion. If a student already is

struggling when a classmate dies by suicide, the risk for the struggling student is greater.

- Suicide has many causes, but most students who die by suicide likely were struggling with a mental health condition or underlying psychological pain that may not have been apparent to others. At the same time, statistics show that most people with mental health conditions do not attempt suicide.
- Vulnerable students will be most at risk during the “postvention” phase, a time in which your district should hold “activities that help people cope with the emotional stress resulting from a suicide and prevent additional trauma that could lead to further suicidal behavior and deaths.”
- Schools should treat all student deaths the same way, whether it is due to cancer, an automobile accident, or by suicide. The reason: Different messages reinforce the negative association that surrounds suicide and can be very painful to a student’s family and close friends.
- In any materials you send home or to the media, health officials urge you to be sure to include helpline information, including the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741.

SPEAK LIFE

The Perry Local School District serves about 4,800 students from Massillon, Ohio, and the unincorporated areas of Stark County, about an hour south of Cleveland. In the fall of 2017, three students died by suicide; by January, the number had doubled. All the deaths happened outside school hours.

At a press conference in late January, Carole Vesely of the Crisis Intervention

and Recovery Center noted that contagion was a factor in the suicides, but said, “The day a person takes their own life is not the first time they have thought about suicide.”

The school district added two counselors at the high school and has developed anti-bullying programs, even though bullying was not cited as a factor in any of the student deaths. Community meetings, as well as group meetings with students, were held throughout the school year.

In September, during Suicide Prevention Month and as another school year began, the district hosted another communitywide event to promote what has become known as the “Perry Pledge: Speak Life, Every Person, Every Day.” The focus was on promoting messages around kindness, positivity, and togetherness. A variety of community and school organizations were available to provide resources and support to families in the district.

“Throughout this past year, we have talked about ‘Speaking Life’ to each other and the ability to be kind, despite our differences,” Superintendent Scott Beatty said in a press release promoting the event. “We wanted to focus this on an area that would help our community continue to move forward and better serve our students.”

By all accounts, the event was a success, but school officials continue to be on the lookout for signs of students at risk. Like the school officials in Santa Fe, the district I visited for a feature story in this month’s issue of *ASBJ*, they know that students’ mental health cannot be ignored. Too much is at stake.

RESOURCES

Here are some online resources for you to look at when developing messages about a suicide in your school district:

- The Framework for Successful Messaging, created by the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, provides information on developing talking points that are “strategic, safe, positive, and make use of relevant guidelines and best practices.” Find more information at <http://suicidepreventionmessaging.org>.
- The aforementioned *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools* is available as a free download by going to either the AFSP site at www.afsp.org or to the Suicide Prevention Resource Center’s website at www.sprc.org.
- Guidelines for media, developed by a variety of mental health organizations as well as journalists, are available at <http://reportingonsuicide.org>.



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