

Our Lady of Lourdes Secondary School

Crisis Response Policy (Critical Incident Plan)

Introduction

The school of the 21st century faces the real prospect of having to respond, at short or no notice, to crises of different kinds. While critical incidents by their very nature tend to occur without warning and at any time of the day or night, this policy provides guidance for those whose task it is to manage such incidents. However, this policy is more advisory than prescriptive as each crisis may demand a different set of responses.

A critical incident may be defined as any event that seriously affects members of the school community. Some crises affecting schools are listed below:

- The death of a member of the school community through sudden death, accident, terminal illness or suicide.
- An accident involving pupils or staff on or off the school premises.
- A physical attack on staff member(s) or student(s) or intrusion into the school.
- Serious damage to the school building through fire, flood, vandalism etc.
- The disappearance of a member of the school community.
- An accident or tragedy in the wider community.

Critical Incident Management Team

So that the school is in a position to respond effectively to any crisis that it may encounter, the Principal will establish a standing committee of the school staff comprising the following:

- Principal
- Deputy Principal
- Guidance Counsellor
- Relevant Year Head and Relevant Class Tutor.

Procedures to be followed in the event of a Critical Incident occurring during school time.

1. Hearing the News

Once a critical incident comes to the attention of a member of the school community, he/she should, where possible and practical, inform the senior management of the school immediately. However, where it is apparent that an emergency situation exists, it may be necessary to call one or other of the emergency services in the first instance.

2. Establish the Facts

Before taking any action, it is crucial that the school has the correct information regarding the crisis. Therefore it is important that senior and involved staff gather to establish the facts. This may involve contacting Hospitals, Gardaí, Emergency/Medical Services, Parents etc.

3. Senior Management to Convene a Meeting of the Critical Incident Team

Once the facts of the crisis have been established, a meeting of available members of this team should be called to agree an immediate plan of action which may involve

- Informing staff and students – where feasible all staff should be informed in the first instance.
- Contacting parents.
- Visiting families most intimately touched by the crisis.
- Organising a school assembly/Mass.
- Liaising with the relevant support groups – Counsellors, Health Board, NEPS, DES, etc.
- Agreeing a factual and sensitive statement with regard to the crisis so as to dispel rumours while not adding to the distress of those involved or invading their privacy.
- Assigning tasks to members of the Critical Incident Team.
- Principal or Deputy Principal to handle phone enquiries and to deal with the media.
- Organising a timetable for the school to respond to the crisis – wherever possible adhering to normal timetables and routines – while avoiding any signs of insensitivity to those most touched by the crisis.
- Where a funeral is involved and the school proposes to be involved in the funeral in some way, it will be necessary to liaise with the bereaved family regarding any such involvement; it should not be automatically assumed that the family will be happy to go along with whatever the school decides. Indeed, any public actions on the part of the school at the time of any such a bereavement should be discussed with the bereaved or their representatives before being embarked upon.
- Organising a staff meeting and deciding whether or not an outside professional will be invited to that meeting. Where students are going to be in the school, it is critical that appropriate supervision be put in place for all students whose teacher or supervisors may be involved in meetings.

4. Staff Meeting

All staff (including support staff) should be invited to the meeting. The following matters should be addressed by the meeting

- A sensitive account of the facts as known, having regard for the privacy of those involved in the incident. Information needs to be provided on a need to know basis.
- The views and feelings of staff.
- How, by whom and in what setting students and other members of the school community should be informed of the incident.

- An outline of the timetable that the Critical Incident Team has drawn up for responding to the crisis – the timetable may, if necessary and feasible, be amended at this meeting.
- Details regarding the outside agencies that have been contacted and the support programme that will be put in place for staff, students and other members of the school community.
- Procedure for identifying vulnerable students.

5. Informing Students.

It is important that all those needing to be informed of the incident receive the necessary information as soon as is practicable. In the course of preparing to inform students, the following matters should be taken in to account.

- It will be helpful if a common statement is agreed before students are informed.
- Consideration should be given to providing those delegated the task of informing students with an agreed script. But, of course, each person will have her/his own way of relating to her/his group of students.
- If at all possible, all students should be told at the same time in class groups no larger than normal class size.
- The ideal person to inform a group of students is someone who knows them well and has their trust. Where a member of staff indicates that he/she would be uncomfortable undertaking the task of informing a group of students, his/her view should be respected. Indeed, where a member of staff feels, for whatever reason, that he/she is unable to be involved in the school's direct response to a serious trauma, he/she should be allowed to opt out readily.
- Clear unambiguous information (the facts as they are known) will reduce the spread of rumour. However, it is important to recognise that everyone does not have to be given full details of the event. Again, information needs to be provided on a need to know basis.
- Details of a critical incident will obviously need to be communicated to a group of students in a sensitive manner and those informing a group of students should check the list of those they are informing carefully and note if there are any students in the group who are likely to be more seriously affected by the information than others.
- Those informing students of the details of the incident should spend a reasonable amount of time with the students to allow them to react to news of the incident. Where news of the death of a member of the school community is being communicated to students, it should be acknowledged that young and old will all find it difficult to cope with the sad news and that support will be provided through the Chaplain, the Guidance Counsellor and other support services.
- The statement should highlight the support that will be available to students in respect of the incident – both in the immediate and longer term.
- Where a clear plan of action has been agreed in respect of the incident this should be conveyed to the students. Where a plan is in the process of being prepared the students should also be advised of this and of the time/date that they may expect to be advised of the details of such a plan.

- In the case of a suspected suicide, great care should be taken not to use the term. “suicide” until it has been established categorically that the student’s death was as a result of suicide. Even then, it is important to respect the privacy and sensitivity of the deceased’s family and friend.
- 6. Where an Accident has occurred on a School Activity/Trip**
- Different situations will call for different responses but the following points should be considered.
- The preparation of a clear statement to assist those contacting the relatives of those who have been injured or affected by the incident.
 - It is preferable to have a group of people involved so that all concerned are informed in or around the same time.
 - Those contacted should be offered as much practical help as possible – transport, phone numbers, relevant contact persons and other resources.
 - Those contacting the most affected by the incident should check to see if the contacted are on their own and therefore in need of support.
 - Ideally, the most seriously affected should be spoken to face to face rather than by phone.
 - The communication should contain some element which allows the person conveying it to check that it has been fully understood.
- 7. Liaising with the Press**
- It is important that the school plan for the distinct possibility that the media will enquire about the incident, by nominating one person only to act as the spokesperson. In preparing a press statement the following issues need to be considered.
- Priority should be given to the sensitivities and needs of those affected directly by the incident.
 - Other than where it is manifestly in the interest of those affected by the incident, the names, addresses and phone numbers of those affected by the crisis should not be provided to the media.
 - Statements should be confined to the facts as known and conjecture should be avoided – other than where it is manifestly in the interests of those affected to speculate on what may have happened.
 - Give some thought, in advance, to the kinds of question that the media are likely to ask. Where possible and practical, seek the advice of someone who has experience in dealing with the media prior to talking to the media.
 - Understand that the media are not necessarily the enemy. Reporters also have a job to do and the public is entitled to information that neither impinges on the privacy of those affected by the incident nor exacerbates the incident.
 - Do not feel that you have to answer a question from a reporter simply because it is asked. Where there is good reason for not answering a question, the reporter should be informed politely that you do not wish to answer it.
 - There are two ways in which the media may be spoken to-on the record and off the record. When a matter is put on the record, you are essentially giving the journalist the right to report what you say. On the other hand, if you speak off the record to a reporter, you are not giving them the right to report what you say. It may be good idea to, at the outset, talk to the reporter off the record and then only go on the record when you are clear

on what you are happy to see reported in the media. Indeed, before initiating any discussion with a reporter, it may be prudent to clarify the issue of “off the record” and “on the record”.

- Agree a specific time and place for media briefings – either on a once off or on going basis.
- A Press Statement should simple and brief. It should, where appropriate, express the sorrow of the entire school community at the sudden death of one of their members and it should extend sympathy to the bereaved family. Again, other that where there is a clear need to do otherwise, the statement should be adhered to – and not elaborated on – in all communications with the media and it should be familiar to every member of the school staff.

8. Others to be Informed

Others will need to be informed of the incident in due course.

- Chairperson of the Board of Management.
As soon as is practical, the Chairperson of the Board of Management should be informed and it will be the responsibility of the Chairperson to decide whether an emergency meeting of the Board is necessary. Whether or not to close the school will depend on the judgement of the Chairperson and the Principal. Should it be decided to close the school, it is advisable to do so ONLY after informing the students both of the details of the incident and of the routine that the school will follow over the coming days.
- Parent Body.
As soon as is practical, all parents should be informed in writing of all relevant details of the incident – again on a need to know basis. The correspondence to parents should also provide clear information in respect of the following; how the school proposes to respond to the incident in the short, medium and long term, and how parents may assist both their own daughters and other students in recovering from any trauma that the incident may have caused them.
- School Insurers
Some incidents may require the school to inform their insurers.

9. Review

It is important to regularly review this policy and set of procedures in the light of experience. Indeed, it is particularly helpful to take time to evaluate the effectiveness of policies and procedures subsequent to their application. It is also a good idea to make contact with other schools and professionals to compare the effectiveness of their Crisis Response Policy/Plan and assess courses of action both proposed and taken.

10. Proactively

It is not sufficient to plan merely to respond to crises when they occur. Rather, it is essential that all members of the school community be provided, on an ongoing basis, with the skills, knowledge and sensitivity to prevent the occurrence of crises. This can be done through the provision of in-service for teachers and other support staff, information meetings for parents and an effective pastoral/student support structure within the school.

11. Critical Incident Debriefing

As soon as is practicable after the core elements of the crisis (critical incident) have ended, the school will take every reasonable step to provide all members of the school community, who were most deeply affected by the incident/crisis, with an opportunity to participate in a critical incident debriefing programme. Furthermore, the school will seek to persuade those who may be reticent about taking part in such a programme of the advantages of taking part in it.

12. Conclusion

While it is hoped that this policy will be of assistance in the event of a crisis occurring in our school community, it is nevertheless important to recognise that this policy cannot replace the most vital qualities needed in dealing with such personal issues as suicide, bereavement and loss – the sensitivity, care and compassion we offer to one another and to our students on a daily basis.

APPENDICIES

Appendix 1

Principal's Checklist

The following is a checklist of things to consider on the morning of a tragedy. They are not written in order of what must come first etc. It is important for a Principal to take time to plan what he/she must do and what is appropriate to say to all concerned.

- Gather the facts-who?what?when?and where?
- Contact appropriate agencies
- Convene the Critical Incident Management Team
- Organise for the supervision of students
- Inform staff
- Agree on a statement of the facts
- Identify high risk students
- Appoint someone to deal with phone enquires
- Organise timetable for the day

MAINTAIN THE NORMAL SCHOOL ROUTINE WHEN AT ALL POSSIBLE

- Inform parents/guardians
- Inform students
- Make contact with the bereaved family
- Organise support
- Respond to the media.

MEDIUM TERM ACTION (24-72 HOURS)

- Review the events of the first 24 hours.
- Arrange support for individual students, groups of students, and parents, if necessary.

- Plan for the reintegration of students and staff (e.g. Absentees, injured, siblings, close relatives etc)
- Plan visits to injured
- Liaise with the family regarding funeral arrangements/memorial service
- Attendance and participation at funeral/memorial service
- School closure

LONG TERM ACTIONS

- Monitor students for signs of continuing distress
- Evaluate response to incident and amend the Critical Incident Management Plan appropriately
- Formalise the Critical Incident Plan for the future
- Inform new staff/new school pupils affected by Critical Incidents where appropriate
- Decide on appropriate ways to deal with anniversaries (be sensitive to special days and events)

Appendix 2

School Emergency Contact Sheet

Contact	Name	Telephone No
School Doctor	Dr. O'Beirne	051 420300
Local CareDoc		1850 334999
Fire brigade	Wexford	053 23000
Gardaí	New Ross	051 421204
Hospitals	Waterford Reg. Hospital	051 848000
	St. Luke's, Kilkenny	056 7785000
	Wexford County Hospital	053 42233
Local Clergy	Fr. Kavanagh	051 421515
		087 2335432
Counselling and Bereavement Service		
Educational Services	NEPS	

Appendix 3

Response to Critical Incidents – A Timetable of Events

From 9.00 a.m. to 11.00 a.m. the following sequence should be followed:

- Switch off bell until meeting ends and inform staff as they arrive to attend a meeting in the staff room at 9.00 a.m.
- Announcement to all available staff in staff room by Principal and / or Deputy principal and / or Career Guidance Counsellor.

- Bell is rung and classes commence. Teachers will be encouraged, where comfortable, to inform their class or recognise the event by discussion, a prayer etc. The timetable for the day will be followed insofar as possible.
- Announcement to group most likely to be affected as soon as possible in classroom by Principal and/or Deputy Principal and/or Career Guidance Counsellor.
- Lighting of candle outside Principal's Office.
- NEPS informed and advice/assistance sought by Career Guidance Counsellor and or Principal.

From 11.00 a.m. to the end of the day the following sequence should be followed:

- Career Guidance Counsellor together with the NEPS representatives will continue to identify, with the help of all staff, students/staff most deeply affected and in need of support.
- All staff need to be mindful that at a time like this they too may need support and should feel comfortable accessing that support. The Principal will be supportive in accessing suitable professionals on a confidential basis when that need arises.
- The Principal or a representative of the school, will visit the family.
- During the last period, the class/year group/students identified as needing most support will be brought together again by the Principal and / or Deputy Principal and / or Career Guidance Counsellor. They will be encouraged to talk about the events of the day and their feelings with their parents/guardians or anyone else who might support them at this time.
- All students have a letter to bring home at the end of the school day. (see appendix 4 or 5)

Appendix 4

Letter to Parents (1)

(Sample letter in the event of a tragedy)

Dear Parents,

The school has experienced (the sudden death, accidental injury) of one of our students. We are deeply saddened by the death/events.

(Brief details of the incident, and in the event of a death, perhaps some positive remembrances of the person lost)

We have support structures in place to help your child cope with this tragedy.
(Elaborate)

It is possible that your child may have some feelings that he/she may like to discuss with you. You can help your child by taking time to listen and encouraging them to express their feelings. It is important to give them truthful information that is appropriate to their age.

If you would like advice or assistance you may contact the following people at the school. (Details)

Yours sincerely,

Appendix 5

Letter to Parents (2)

(Sample letter requesting consent for involvement of outside professional(s))

Dear Parents,

Following the recent (tragedy, death of X) we have arranged professional support for students in school who need particular help. (X....) is available to help us with this work. This support will usually consist of talking to children, either in small groups or on a one to one basis and offering reassurance and advice as appropriate.

Your son/daughter has been identified as one of the students who would benefit from meeting with the psychologist. If you would like your child to receive this support please sign the attached permission slip and return it to the school by

If you would like further information on the above or to talk to the psychologist, please indicate this on the slip or telephone the school.

Yours sincerely,

I/we consent to having our daughter/son met by a psychologist employed by the Minister for Education and Science.

I/we understand that my daughter/son may meet the psychologist(s) in an individual or group session depending on the arrangements which are thought to be most appropriate.

Name of student: _____

Class /year: _____

Date of Birth: _____

I would like my daughter/son _____ to avail of the support being offered by the psychologist.

Signed: _____ (Parent/Guardian)