



Coláiste Cois Siúire

Critical Incident Policy

SCOPE:

This document is drawn up for the whole school. It is a framework of what to do, if a critical incident situation arises.

RATIONALE:

Coláiste Cois Siúire, in recognising it's duty of care to the whole school community, has drafted this policy. The success of all suicide prevention initiatives in the school is dependent on agreed procedures and routines.

DEFINITION: A CRITICAL INCIDENT

"Any incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanism of the school and disrupts the running of the school" (NEPS)

TYPES OF CRISIS:

- Sudden death – accident, murder, suicide
- An accident on/off school premises
- A physical attack on staff/student
- Serious damage to school
- Accident or tragedy in wider school community

COIS COLÁISTE SIÚIRE'S CRITICAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM

Principal	Mr Thomas Walsh
Guidance Counsellor	Ms Michelle Finnegan
Chaplain	Fr Eamon O'Gorman
SPHE	Ms Imelda Behan

PREVENTION:

- Coláiste Cois Siúire promotes the health and well-being of students, teachers and the wider school community.
- It does this by putting structures, policies and activities in place to make school a safe and supportive environment.
- Social, Personal and Health Education is part of the curriculum. SPHE assists in the prevention of suicide by offering the students opportunity to;
 1. Develop a greater sense of self
 2. build and support their own self worth
 3. develop the capacity to integrate into a group setting and to give and take support from within that setting
 4. identify, own and express their feelings in a way that is conducive to their own health and to the health of those with whom they relate
 5. Learn decision-making skills that will enable them to incur less stress in their lives and thereby reduce the risk of suicide.
- Coláiste Cois Siúire has a clear anti-bullying policy which is supported by students, teachers and parents.
- Coláiste Cois Siúire's students' council is a positive way for students to promote communication skills and to be informed of and involved in school policy.

- Students are encouraged to become involved in as wide a range of extra curricular activities as is practical in the school.
- Coláiste Cois Siúire has a clear, supportive substance misuse policy in place.

INTERVENTION:

SUICIDE – INDICATORS AND INTERVENTION MEASURES

Suicide is a particularly traumatic event in the live of any school. A study conducted in Ottawa, Canada, revealed a number of behaviours which can be exhibited by those contemplating suicide. Principals and staff may find this list and the suggested forms of intervention helpful.

Ottawa Pointers

1. loss of interest in usual activities.
2. withdrawal from social contact.
3. difficulty in concentrating, problems with judgement and memory.
4. Dramatic fall-off in school performance.
5. Feelings of sadness, emptiness, hopelessness may be expressed in essays.
6. Sleep disturbance – decreased, or sometimes increased.
7. Increased overt displays of anger and rage, verbal or physical.
8. Excessive use of drugs and/or alcohol.
9. Promiscuous behaviour.
10. Uncharacteristic delinquent behaviour/thrill seeking.
11. Lack of supportive relationships with friends or family.
12. Previous suicidal threats, gestures, attempts.
13. Statements, verbal or written, revealing wish to die or preoccupation with death.
14. Nihilistic comments – life is meaningless, filled with misery.
15. Gestures to be noticed – self-mutilation, scratches.
16. Planning for death, making funeral arrangements, giving away treasured possessions.
17. Suddenly becoming cheerful after long depression (relief when decision taken)

WHAT TO DO:

Take it seriously – have a talk with the young person keeping some principles in mind;

- 1 Remain in control – don't panic, act slowly.
- 2 Encourage expression of feelings and accept them (give time).
- 3 Avoid judgemental comments or empty reassurance.
- 4 Avoid promises you can't keep (e.g. secrecy; call me any time; confidentiality).
- 5 Empathise and let them know you care (biggest single preventative is knowing someone cares).
- 6 Encourage them to see a counsellor or therapist immediately.
- 7 Inform Parents and Management of school.
- 8 If seriously worried, don't leave them alone.
- 9 Seek advice and support yourself (nobody should carry the worry about a suicidal youngster alone).

WHAT NOT TO DO:

- 1 Don't assume a youngster is not the "type" to commit suicide.
- 2 Don't leave a child/teenager alone if you believe the risk of suicide is imminent.
- 3 Don't act shocked at whatever is told to you.
- 4 Don't debate whether suicide is right or wrong. This may make him/her feel more guilty and intensify the depression.
- 5 Don't take responsibility for "saving the youth, get additional help".
- 6 Don't feel that you have to have an answer to all questions. If you do not know the meaning of life, say so. Make it clear that you are there to help, not to solve problems.
- 7 Don't be afraid to be the first to mention suicide. Generally it comes as a relief to the person that you are willing to discuss the subject.
- 8 Don't deny or cover up the person's feelings or intents. Don't be judgmental. Acknowledge his/her feelings without reinforcing the negative. "I believe you are feeling miserable right now. Let's talk about it".

- 9 Don't abandon him/her because the problems are too overwhelming. Follow through in getting him/her help. Don't be another loss or rejection to him/her.
- 10 Don't wait too long because you hope he/she will get over it. It can't hurt to talk about his/her feelings.

WHAT CAN YOU DO WHEN A CHILD SAYS "I WANT TO KILL MYSELF"

- 1 Try to keep your own shock under control.
 - 2 Reply with an open question.
 - 3 Try to find out how long they have been feeling this way.
 - 4 Who else have they told?
 - 5 Can you speak to Mum or Dad?
 - 6 If "everything" is wrong, start checking "everything"
 - Parents
 - School
 - Exams
 - Siblings
 - Friends
 - Home environment
- Add your own to this*
- 7 Re-assure – everything is redeemable. There is always a second chance. Nothing is ever so bad that a parent will not love a child (this includes their sexual orientation, failing exams, missing CAO points, being a horrible person etc., etc.).
 - 8 Make a contract that they won't hurt themselves until you meet them again and get help.
 - 9 Where are your back ups?
 - 10 Can you contact the parents?
 - 11 Make a plan of possible helping agencies and follow through.
 - 12 Get support for yourself. Hang in there!

For students at risk of suicide parents or guardians need to be informed of the teachers' concerns and the circumstances surrounding their concerns as soon as is possible. Arrange if possible for the parents or guardians to come to the school, and if this is not possible a specific plan of action should be agreed with them.

The school or teacher if they believe the student is at risk should recommend referral to professional services for immediate assessment. The school should provide the parents with specific contacts and telephone numbers in their local region. Teachers should assist with making these contacts if necessary.

A nominated teacher should maintain contact with the parents or guardians throughout the process. The school needs to document what has occurred, what actions were taken by whom, when, where and how and in keeping with principles of good practice.

POSTVENTION:

Critical Incident Response Plan

- 1 Establish the facts:
It is crucial that the school has the correct information regarding the crisis. Therefore it is important that the Principal and involved staff gather to establish the facts – this may involve contacting others such as hospitals, Gardaí, parents.

- 2 Convene a meeting with key staff.
This group will agree an immediate plan of action, which may involve
 - Informing students and staff
 - Contacting parents
 - Visiting the home of the bereaved – (2 staff members)
 - Involving the chaplain etc.
 - Alerting outside agencies such as counsellors etc.
 - Agreeing on a common statement with regard to the crisis for staff, parents, students and the media (written statement).
 - Assigning tasks within the group
 - Organising the timetable/routine for the day. (adhering to the normal school routing is important if this is possible)
 - Organising the supervision of students during any staff meetings.

- 3 Inform
 - It is vital that all those needing information receive it as soon as it is practicable. It is helpful if a common statement is agreed when informing

students and others. Such a statement will reduce the spread of rumour. Attempt to alert and inform staff in the first instance.

- If at all possible the students should be told at the same time in no larger than normal class size.
- In the case where an accident has occurred on a school trip, a similar statement is needed to assist those who will be telephoning relatives. It is preferable to have a group of people involved so that all concerned are informed in or around the same time.
- Give parents/guardians relevant and factual information.
- Give telephone numbers for enquiries.
- The parents of other children in the school will be informed of the incident and that their child may be upset. Send a letter to parents stating the facts and brief details of the incident.
- The nature of the event will clearly have an influence on how students are informed.
 - * Give facts and avoid speculation. This will help to dispel rumours, which can cause unnecessary distress.
 - * Allow pupils to ask questions, tell their story and express feelings.
 - * Help students realise that overwhelming emotions are natural and normal following a critical incident.
- Make contact with the bereaved family.

DEALING WITH THE MEDIA:

If there are to be enquiries from the press, it is important that the school cater for this possibility by nominating one person only to act as a liaison. In preparing a press statement, thought should be given to the following suggestions:

- Priority to be given to the sensitivities and needs of those affected directly by the crisis.
- The non-release of names, addresses and telephone numbers.
- Rely on facts and avoid speculation.
- Consider likely questions and a response to them.
- Agree with the press a time for briefings if this is necessary in an ongoing situation.
- Nominate a specific location for press briefings.

It is recommended that this press statement be simple and brief. It should 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. This 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.

- Brief staff and students and auxiliary staff and advise them on dealing with the media.
- Encourage students not to speak to the media about the death, out of respect for the grieving family and as a form of self-protection. Ask journalists not to interview grieving students.
- Consider setting aside a room for the media. This may help to control their access to staff and students.

4. SHORT TERM ACTION:

The action that is needed in the short-term will obviously be very dependent on the nature of the crisis.

Students:

- The Principal will inform the student body at the earliest possible opportunity. He will begin with the deceased student's class or classes. He will be prepared to spend a reasonable amount of time with the students to allow them to react to the news of the death. The Class Year Head or another appropriate person such as the Guidance Counsellor or Chaplain will accompany the Principal and remain with the class after his/her departure. In addressing the class, the Principal will tell students of their friend's sudden death and advise that it is an event with which everyone – students and teachers – will find it difficult to cope with. He/she will also explain the routine for the day and the Guidance Counsellor, Chaplain and other support services.
- Efforts will be made to sustain an atmosphere where it is "okay" to talk about the experience. This may cause problems for some teachers. However, all staff who are available and willing and others such as Chaplains, etc., will be asked to lend a hand. This will entail sensitivity on the part of Year Heads and Principal as regards time needed for such accessibility of support personnel for students.
- The most essential quality in adults needed by students is that of listening. The school will put in place a support system for students in this regard. Such a system will again involve those staff who are willing and able to offer support, together with outside professionals where required, time and resources to carry

out their role, a method of supporting each other, and a review of their effectiveness.

- Encourage contact with home in the initial stages of a crisis. Parents need to be able to contact the school if they have information that will help the school in any way in caring for their child.
- The involvement of students in any funeral or other services will be discussed. At all times the rights of the deceased family to privacy must be respected.
- The students may wish to organise some service or ritual within the confines of the school. They will be consulted as to the nature of such a service. Such an event may be of great benefit to staff and parents.
- Attention will be given to the possible signs of distress being exhibited by students. In noticing possible signs, it is important to say that these are not necessarily indicative of stress in relation to a trauma. Rather they are merely prompts to staff as they “watch out” for the students in their care. Such signs will be related to uncharacteristic behaviour, for example being unusually quiet. It is important that staff check out signs with others before drawing conclusions.
- Students need to be asked their “permission” regarding discussing their feelings and reactions to a crisis. The Principal, Deputy Principal, Year Heads, Guidance Counsellor are key people in addressing the needs of individual students.
- Freedom to be upset is important for anyone responding to trauma. The school needs to ask itself how it creates a safe atmosphere for this to occur.
- Students not directly involved with the trauma will also be monitored as some may be affected. We know this from our own past experience. Allowing students to express their sympathy can be a catalyst for such students – writing a card, attending a service.
- Constant reminders will be given in relation to the supports that are available within the school. We know that students react in different ways and at different times in the aftermath of a traumatic event.
- Focus on the friends of a bereaved student, as they can be the best source of support. Often the bereaved student may not wish to speak to an adult and may

rely heavily on friends. These close friends may need support as they attempt to find ways to be of help.

STAFF:

- Many staff, following a trauma, may need to air their feelings and reactions. It may be helpful to consider a number of options such as: staff meeting, inviting in professional help or a staff prayer service.
- Care needs to be taken of those staff directly involved with the trauma that they receive support, are not overworked, and have time to de-brief. Professional counselling will be made available.
- Staff who feel for whatever reason that they are unable to be involved in the school's direct response to the trauma will be able to opt out readily.
- Those staff having any concerns about students or others in relation to the trauma will have easy access to personnel who can assist them.
- The guidance counsellor, chaplain and other members of staff will be the key resource in the short and medium term response.

5. **FUNERAL SERVICES:**

- Decide what form of representation is appropriate. It is essential, where possible, to consult the family concerned.
- While it would be appropriate for the deceased student's classmates to attend the church services and the burial, it would be inappropriate for large numbers of students to be present. Students could still contribute to the church services through the purchase of wreaths and at a later stage, could take part in a special service organised by the school.
- The Inquest

The inquest is a time when memories of the tragedy may revive emotional reactions experienced at the time of a pupil's death. Staff, students and family may need personal consideration at this time. The measures for dealing with the media will be reintroduced for the period of the inquest.

- The Anniversary

The anniversary of the pupil's death may revive deep feelings among pupils and staff. Care will be taken if considering a memorial service to mark the occasion. Consultation will take place with the deceased student's family to act in accordance with their wishes.

6. MEDIUM AND LONG-TERM ACTION:

- Students returning to school after a major accident or bereavement cannot be easily categorised in terms of their needs. Care will be taken to monitor their relationships with peers and teachers; falling behind in academic and other work, involvement in extracurricular activities.
- The school will offer the Rainbows programme to students. Rainbows is a support group programme for children and young adults who have suffered a significant loss through death or separation or any painful transition.
- When a subsequent bereavement occurs in the school setting, care will be taken to support those who were bereaved previously as this subsequent trauma may trigger deep emotional reactions.

COUNSELLING SERVICES

Consideration will be given to the counselling services, which may be required by students and teachers in the aftermath of the student's death. The Principal will discuss this matter with the school Guidance Counsellor and other relevant staff members such as the school Chaplain. The existing school counselling services may be sufficient to provide the necessary response.

If it is considered that external counselling services are necessary, steps will be taken to ensure that the latter work in close co-operation with the school's counselling services.

The decision to engage such services will, in the first instance, be communicated to all staff members and subsequently to the students. The community care teams of the Health Boards will be contacted for advice on appropriate counselling services.

7. REVIEW:

It is vital to regularly review all of these procedures. Time will be taken to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy and procedures subsequent to their application.

8. CONCLUSION:

It is hoped that the above draft plan will be of support in the event of a tragedy occurring in our school community.

PRINCIPAL'S CHECKLIST/ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION

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.

- Take time to let the news sink in.
- Call a meeting of the Critical Incident Management Team.
- Put together as much factual information as possible.
- Inform staff what has happened.
- Discuss school routine for the first day with the staff.
- Identify particular students who may need to be told individually e.g. close friends, relatives etc.
- Inform the pupils that a student has tragically died and explain that this is something everyone will find difficult to cope with. Explain school routine for the day and support and back up for students.
- Contact Local Health Board Crisis Service.
- Make contact with the family of the deceased.
- Meet with key staff who can offer student support and decide on the format for this.

- Decide on any other arrangements which need to be made on the first day e.g. prayers for the student and his/her family.
- Check in with staff in the staff room during the day and keep abreast of what is happening in the school.
- Be aware of any particular teachers who may be particularly distressed e.g. teachers who are recently bereaved themselves or who have had prior experience of suicide in their family.
- Encourage staff to come to you during the day and let you know how things are going.
- Find out details of the funeral etc. and communicate this to staff and students.
- Make contact with the bereaved family.
- At the end of the first day review events with staff and make plans for the following day.
- Make staff aware of students who are particularly vulnerable and what supports will be available to them.
- If there is any likelihood of interest from the media discuss a strategy to deal with any such requests.

USEFUL ADDRESSES & RELEVANT REFERENCES

THE BEREAVEMENT COUNSELLING SERVICE

Dublin St, Baldoyle, Co Dublin. Tel 01 – 8391766

THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS

An organisation of bereaved parents who offer support. It is open to all parents who have suffered the loss of a child of any age.

Dublin Tel 01 – 8322197

Donegal Tel 075 – 41493

Cork Tel 021 – 291892

Clare Tel 065 – 20024

Cavan Tel 049 – 38436

IRISH FRIENDS OF THE SUICIDE BEREAVED

Support group for individuals bereaved by suicide. P.O. Box 162, Cork. Tel 021 – 294318.

SOLAS – BEREAVEMENT COUNSELLING FOR CHILDREN

Bereavement service for children and their families following the death of a parent, carer or siblings. Barnardo's, Christchurch Sq, Dublin 8. Tel 01 – 4540355.

THE SAMARITANS

Consult local telephone directory for local service. Head Office: 112 Marlborough St., Dublin 1. Tel 1850 609090.

IRISH SUDDEN INFANT DEATH ASSOCIATION

Nationwide branches. Head Office: Carmichael House, Nth Brunswick Street, Dublin 7. Tel 01 – 8747007.

THE IRISH HOSPICE FOUNDATION

A most significant organisation. Head Office: 9 Fitzwilliam Place, Dublin 2. Tel: 01 – 6765599.

BEGINNING EXPERIENCE GROUPS

A nationwide group providing weekends for those bereaved through death or loss. The young adult Beginning Experience (YABE) is a connected group. Their Dublin address: St Audoen's, High St, Dublin 8. Tel 01 – 6791018.

BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT GROUP

27, Riverview, Kilkenny Tel: 056 – 626421
Mr Padraig Morrow

CAIRDEAS

Waterford. Tel: 1850 201249.