

MANAGING A CRITICAL INCIDENT

Introduction

Every school faces the real prospect of having to respond, at short or no notice, to crises of various types. While critical incidents of their very nature tend to occur without warning and at any time day or night, this set of guidelines provides advice for those whose task it is to manage such incidents. However, we are being more advisory than prescriptive - since each crisis situation will demand a different set of responses.

What is a Critical Incident?

A Critical Incident is any incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school and disrupts the running of the school. It is important for the school to identify potential critical incidents and which procedures to follow in each instance. 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 members or students 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, a loss of a family member or school friends, a major accident locally or abroad etc.

The term 'suicide' will not be used without the consent of the family involved or until it has been established categorically that a person's death was as the result of suicide. The terms 'tragic death' or 'sudden death' shall be used instead.

Critical Incident Management Team

To ensure 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 members of staff.

Principal

Deputy Principal

Guidance Counsellor

Relevant Class Tutor(s) and others who would wish to be involved. The critical incident team should meet on a regular basis to assess the schools readiness for a critical incident. The team will be familiar with the NEPS critical incident advice pack available in the main office and online at

http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/neps_critical_incidents_sch.pdf

Procedures to be followed in the Event of a Critical Incident Occurring

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 Principal. It may be necessary to call one or other of the emergency services in the first instance.

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 the Principal and appropriate staff gather to establish the facts as soon as practically possible.

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 the Critical Incident Team should be called forthwith. This group will need to agree an immediate plan of action, which may include outlining the facts, contacting relevant agencies (Emergency Services, Health Personnel, NEPS and DES Inspectorate etc), preparing a written statement liaising with the media and outside agencies and assigning roles to team members and other staff members as the incident requires. Provision for appropriate and relevant counselling services will also be made.

Staff Meeting – The Principal will meet with the staff to address some key issues such as:

Facts of the Incident

Convey a plan of action/information for staff about which outside agencies have been contacted or are involved and the supports that are in place for both students and staff.

Needs of any staff member need to be acknowledged.

How information is to be relayed to students.

How the school will communicate with the media through liaison team only.

Identify students particularly affected.

Agree the common response when dealing with public.

Teacher support will be sought to provide supervision on an ad hoc basis when necessary.

Visits to affected families organised.

When normal school or abridged school practices should continue/resume

Office Procedure – An agreed statement is to be issued when responding to phone enquiries. Further enquiries are to be directed to the Principal or other members of the critical incident team. Numbers should be available for pupils, parents, guardians, staff and all emergency support services. It is important to maintain a log of events, letter(s) to parents, telephone calls made and received.

Room Allocation – Students should follow the normal class timetable in so far as possible. Where needed the critical incident team may assign a room to outside agencies e.g. counselling service/school psychologist. A room will be available for students who wish to have a quiet area for reflection. A supervised area or support room can be available to facilitate meeting with concerned parents.

After Incident – The Principal with the assistance of the critical incident team will prepare a report for the BOM and DES. Counselling of those affected will continue as needed. The school will offer any appropriate requested assistance to the family.

Long Term – The critical incident team should meet as soon as possible to review the procedures followed, consult with the school community and amend as deemed necessary.