



**DURHAM CATHOLIC
DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD**
Learning and Living in Faith

Suicide Postvention Protocol



2020

Table of Contents

	Page
Introduction	3
Guiding Principles Related to Postvention	3
Key Terms	3
Suicide Postvention Checklist	4
• Immediate Response	4
• Within the First Few Hours	5
• The First 24 Hours	6
• The First Week	8
• Long Term	9
• Planning for the Future	9
Guidelines for Memorialization and Other Important Events	10
 Appendices	
Appendix A: Key Messages for Media	12
Appendix B: Guide to Parent/Guardian Phone Call	14
Appendix C: Points to Cover in Initial Staff Meeting	15
Appendix D: Student Announcements	17
Appendix E: Talking Points for Staff and Students After a Death by Suicide	18
Appendix F: Prayer Resources	20
Appendix G: Office Staff Instructions	21
Appendix H: Sample Letter for School Community (suicide not confirmed)	22
Appendix I: Sample Letter for School Community (suicide confirmed)	23
Appendix J: Suicide in Schools: Information Sheet for Parents/Guardians	24
Appendix K: Talking Points for Parents/Guardians After a Death by Suicide	25
Appendix L: Tip Sheet for Staff in Response to a Critical Incident	26
References / Acknowledgements	27

Introduction

When a student dies by suicide, the effect on a school community is immediate and traumatic, and can increase the risk of suicide in other vulnerable people. This is a phenomena known as suicide 'contagion,' where a person's knowledge of, or exposure to a suicide increases the likelihood of them viewing suicide as an option. Young people have been found to be particularly susceptible to suicide contagion. It is therefore vital that schools support students and staff as they deal with the trauma that follows a suicide.

As part of DCDSB's Mental Health and Addition Strategy (**Together for Mental Health**), this protocol is based on current research and best practice, and has been developed to provide staff with the appropriate procedures in the aftermath of a suicide in order to minimize the risk of suicide contagion in vulnerable students and staff.

Although this is a student-focused document, note that in the case of a staff death by suicide, general postvention principles would still apply, although some of the steps may be different.

Guiding Principles Related to Postvention

- It is important not to inadvertently simplify, glamorize or romanticize the student and their death.
- Be aware of the risk of suicide contagion in vulnerable youth.
- **Do not discuss the method of suicide.** Providing a detailed description of how a youth died can raise suicide risk among other vulnerable youth.
- Schools should emphasize that the **student who died by suicide was likely struggling with mental health difficulties**, such as depression or anxiety, that can cause substantial psychological pain but may not have been apparent to others.
- It is important to **emphasize that help is available for any student** who may be struggling with mental health issues, or suicidal thoughts.

Key Terms

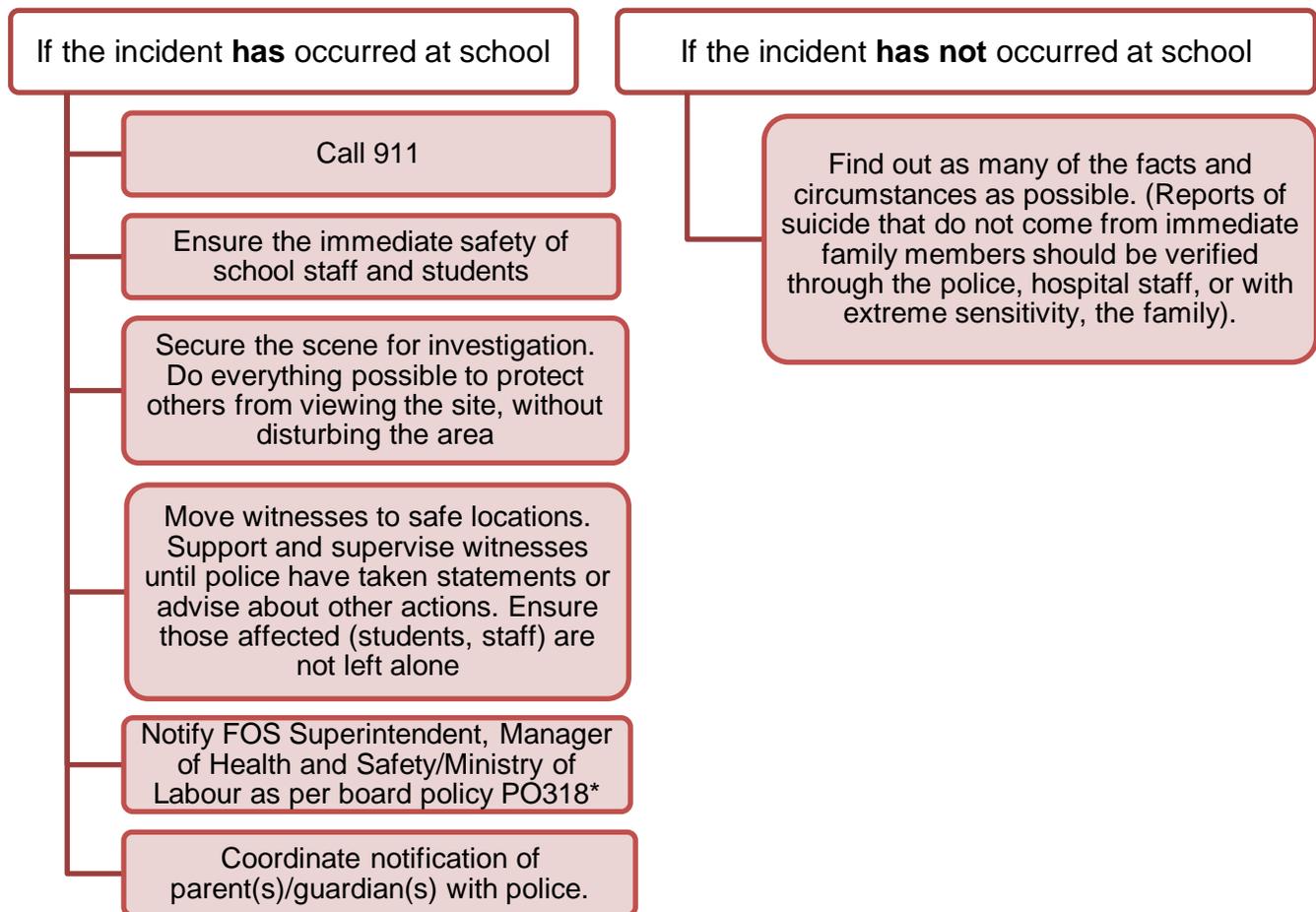
Postvention: programs and interventions for survivors following a death by suicide. These activities help alleviate the suffering and emotional distress of suicide survivors and help prevent suicide contagion.

Suicide contagion: a process by which the suicide or suicidal behaviour of one person or multiple people can contribute to a rise in suicidal behaviours among others, especially those who have pre-existing suicidal thoughts or risk factors for suicide.

Suicide Postvention Checklist

When faced with the need to support your community following a student's death by suicide, there are a number of actions that must be taken at a board and school level to help students and staff cope with the tragedy and to prevent the possibility of contagion. The following **Postvention Checklist** offers guidelines as you plan your responses. These steps will not necessarily be taken in the order outlined, and some of them will need to be implemented simultaneously. Your knowledge of your school community will assist you in determining the most appropriate actions for your setting. Please be sure to use the scripts and sample letters that have been provided in the Appendices, to assist you and your staff in delivering appropriate and consistent messages.

Immediate Response by Principal or Designate:



*When a staff, student, volunteer and/or visitor is killed or critically injured on any premises under the jurisdiction of the Durham Catholic District School Board, the Occupational Health and Safety Act requires notification of the Ministry of Labour (as per board Policy PO318). The scene of the incident must be maintained until the police, and then the Ministry of Labour, has released it. (See **Responding to Critical Incidents and Traumatic Events, Appendix A: Death or Critical Injury in School or Workplace**).

Within the First Few Hours

- Family of Schools (FOS) Superintendent or Superintendent of Safe Schools will notify the Director of Education.
- Superintendent or Principal will contact the System-Level Crisis Response Team Lead, i.e., Manager, Psychological and Speech-Language Services/Chief Psychologist (or designate) to mobilize the System-Level Crisis Response Team.
- Director or designate will contact DCDSB Communications to help with media coverage, if this is a concern. DCDSB Communications can reduce the risk of contagion by helping the media report in the most appropriate manner (see [Appendix A: Key Messages for Media](#)).
- Principal (or designate) will call the parent(s)/guardian(s) to offer condolences and support and determine their wishes regarding communication about the death. These are very difficult conversations to have with families. The needs of the family take precedence over the school's perceived need to communicate specific details. Families may require additional time to notify those closest to them before information is shared at the school.
 - Wishes regarding any communication shared by the school **must** come directly from the parent(s)/guardian(s)
 - If and when parent(s)/guardian(s) chose to share information about the cause of death, funeral arrangements or any other details, you will need to determine **who** this information can be shared with
 - If the parent(s)/guardian(s) does not want the cause of death disclosed, or if the cause of death is undetermined, then it should be referred to as a student "death"
 - Use [Appendix B: Guide to Parent/Guardian Phone Call](#) to guide and record these conversations.
- Reconnect immediately with the FOS Superintendent if the family suggests a connection between the school and the 'reason' for the death.
- If outside of school hours, the Principal will inform staff (via email, text or phone tree) of an emergency staff meeting, before the start of the school day where possible.

Note: Decisions regarding sharing of information must be made in consultation with the FOS Superintendent and/or Superintendent of Safe Schools and the System-Level Crisis Response Team Lead. **Prior to releasing any information**, consent must be obtained from parent(s)/guardian(s) - **not** extended family members - and their wishes regarding communication about the death must be honoured, regardless of communication by external sources.

The First 24 Hours

- An emergency staff meeting should occur at the earliest opportunity (where possible, before the start of the school day) to provide information, and to discuss available supports and next steps. Be sure to include School Administrative Assistants and Custodians in this meeting. The Principal or designate must use **Appendix C: Points to Cover in Initial Staff Meeting**.
- Provide staff members with a script that has been created based on samples in **Appendix D: Student Announcements** and if appropriate, provide **Appendix E: Talking Points for Staff and Students After a Death by Suicide**, (copied in advance of meeting) to ensure appropriate and consistent messaging to students.
- System-Level Crisis Response Team Lead, in collaboration with staff members, will identify and generate a list of vulnerable students who may need immediate support. Staff will need to be alert to warning signs for **all** students, but particularly those identified as being at-risk or most vulnerable. This may include:
 - Closest friends or siblings of the student
 - Any student who may have witnessed the suicide
 - Students with a history of suicide attempts
 - Students who are or have been, accessing mental health services for depression, suicide ideation or self-harm
 - Students known to be struggling with grief or trauma related to other events
 - Students who are expressing guilt about “messages” that they were given by the student, but did not act on or share with an adult
 - Students who had a recent conflict with the student prior to the death
- System-Level Crisis Response Team Lead will determine, in collaboration with staff members, a plan for connecting with students identified above.
- Supervised areas should be set up within the school for student support.
- Staff members who may be particularly impacted by the news of the death should be encouraged to speak with Administration if they feel they will require additional support. Information about the Family Services Employee Assistance Program (FSEAP) should be provided.
- If necessary, set up a space for parent(s)/guardian(s) who arrive at the school.
- School Administrative Assistants should be provided with [Office Staff Instructions \(Appendix G\)](#) to address community and/or media calls. Ensure adequate phone support in the office.
- In consultation with the System-Level Crisis Response Team, use [Appendix D: Student Announcements](#) to create an appropriate script and plan for sharing information with students in a personal way, in classrooms. **Information should never be shared through large group assemblies or via announcements. Do not provide details of the method of suicide.** Avoid oversimplified explanations for

suicidal behaviour. Be aware that students may have learned about this first through social media and that misinformation may have been conveyed through this medium.

- Members of the System-Level Crisis Response Team will provide practical and emotional support for students who require it. They may also provide support for specific students who are deemed by school staff to be “at risk” or “in crisis.”
- Notification to school community ([Appendix H](#) or [Appendix I](#): Sample Letters)
 - If suicide has **not been confirmed** as the cause of death, or if parent(s)/guardian(s) have **not given permission** to share cause of death with school community, use sample letter in [Appendix H](#).
 - If suicide **has been confirmed** as the cause of death AND **consent has been given** by parent(s)/guardian(s) to disclose this, use sample letter in [Appendix I](#), as well as the two handouts **Suicide in Schools: Information Sheet for Parents/Guardians** ([Appendix J](#)) and **Talking Points for Parents/Guardians After a Death by Suicide** ([Appendix K](#)).

Note: Decisions about **which** community members receive communication, (e.g., only parent(s)/guardian(s) of students in certain grades) must be made in consultation with the FOS Superintendent and/or Superintendent of Safe Schools and the System-Level Crisis Response Team Lead. **Prior to releasing any information**, consent must be obtained from parent(s)/ guardian(s) - **not** extended family members - and their wishes regarding communication about the death must be honoured regardless of communication by external sources.

- School Administrative Assistant to adjust attendance register to ensure “absence” phone calls are not sent home to the parent(s)/guardian(s) of the deceased.
- Contact the school(s) where siblings of deceased student attend, to ensure that adequate support is available. Share **only information that we have been given permission to share with that specific school community** (reference parent wishes, as documented in [Appendix B](#)).
- Connect with any other schools that the student had recently attended, including a high school student’s previous elementary school, or an alternate education site that the student had previously attended. In each instance, share **only information that we have been given permission to share with that specific school community** (reference parent wishes, as documented in [Appendix B](#)).
- Contact staff who are absent or on-leave, or other adults who might have regular contact with students, e.g., bus drivers, lunchtime supervisors.
- Encourage staff and students to report inappropriate or concerning social media activity (as per board Policy PO440: Communications, and related Administrative Procedure AP440-5: Social Media Administration, Monitoring and Reporting).
- After appropriate notifications have occurred, ask custodians to lower the school flag (as per board Policy PO424: Flying and Displaying of Flags, and related Administrative Procedure AP424-1). The flag may remain lowered until after the funeral (or for up to approximately five days).

- At the end of the school day, reconvene staff members if there is any updated information that needs to be shared. [Appendix L: Tip Sheet for Staff in Response to a Critical Incident](#) can be copied and given to staff members (optional).
- Debrief as a team, at the end of the day.

The First Week

- Restore the school to its regular routine as soon as reasonably possible. The use of the “support room” should reduce as time passes. The return to regular daily routine and activities is important for the recovery of all affected members of the school community.
- It is recommended that only one member of the school should have the responsibility of communicating with the family at this time.
- Keep staff well-informed. Organize regular staff meetings to:
 - Monitor staff well-being
 - Provide opportunities for debriefing
 - Provide up-to-date information
 - Remind staff that only the DCDSB Communications is authorized to speak with the media
 - Provide information regarding Family Services Employee Assistance Programs (FSEAP)
 - Brainstorm all upcoming events or activities which might need to be altered or cancelled, in view of the suicide, (e.g., excursions or camps which may now be seen as inappropriate or too difficult to manage safely; projects, plays, novels or other items in the curriculum that could invite a focus on suicide; events where a deceased student would be expected to be honoured).
- School team to review and revise list of students who may be in need of additional and ongoing support and make or adjust plans accordingly.
- Memorials involving large numbers of students are discouraged. Schools should consider using their support room or chapel for reflective activities that involve smaller groups of students. (See [Guidelines for Memorialization and Other Important Events](#), page 10).
- Attendance at funerals is a personal decision and schools should not encourage or discourage students from attending. Student attendance at the funeral is the sole responsibility of the parent(s)/guardian(s). The school will not bring students to the funeral.
- Organize staff attendance at the funeral where appropriate. The Principal can organize coverage with the support of other schools.

- Collect the belongings of the deceased student and discuss with the family their wishes with regard to the return of any personal items. This should be done when students are not present.
- After the funeral, the students' desk/seat allocations can be re-arranged.
- Pull OSR and make necessary changes in the Student Information System.
- Keep staff informed about events as they transpire, as appropriate, via email or direct communication at the end of each day as needed (e.g., on topics like funeral arrangements, communication with the parent community, media issues, interruptions to planned trips or exams).
- Debrief as a team at the end of each day, as needed.

Long Term

- Establish a plan to ensure the continued monitoring of student and staff well-being.
- Review and utilize the [Guidelines for Memorialization and Other Important Events](#) (page 10) when planning for relevant events that will be held by the school, (e.g., year book, awards night, graduation) and when considering how to appropriately recognize or memorialize a student without increasing the risk of suicide contagion for vulnerable students.
- Consider a follow-up phone call to the family (in approximately 3 weeks) to show ongoing support.

Planning for the Future

- Significant dates, such as the anniversary of the death, or the deceased's birthday, may stir up emotions and can be an upsetting time for some students and staff. It is helpful to anticipate this and provide an opportunity to acknowledge the date, particularly with students who were especially close to the student who died.
- Prepare to provide support as needed to siblings of the deceased who may be enrolled/enrolling in your school.

Postvention is stressful work.
Be attentive to your self-care and model this for others.

Guidelines for Memorialization and Other Important Events

Students, family members and school communities often wish to memorialize a student who has died. Being compassionate while maintaining the school's primary focus of education can be a balancing act. In the case of suicide, **schools must consider how to appropriately memorialize a student without increasing the risk of suicide contagion for vulnerable students or increasing the emotional crisis.** Prohibiting any and all memorialization is problematic, as it may be perceived as stigmatizing to the student's family and friends, and it can generate negative reactions, which can make an already difficult situation even worse.

It can be helpful for schools to be proactive. Consider setting up a school-based memorialization committee, which would include the System-Level Crisis Response Team Lead and school Social Worker, to vet ideas. Staff trained in facilitation of bereavement ministry can be of valuable assistance on a memorialization committee. In the Catholic school community context, concern for the spiritual well-being of each member affected by a death calls for a compassionate pastoral approach to any form of ritual or prayer being considered. Spiritual consolation and hope can be fostered through focus on the love and mercy of God, faith in the promise of eternal life, and the closeness of Christ to all who mourn (Matthew 5:4, John 11: 32-37).

Suggest a meeting with the student's close friends to talk about the type and timing of any memorials. This can provide an important opportunity for students to be heard, and for the school to sensitively explain why certain activities are allowed and others are not. It is important to memorialize the student in a way that doesn't inadvertently glamorize or romanticize either the student, or the death. Schools can do this by emphasizing the connection between suicide and underlying mental health issues. Whenever possible, schools should coordinate with the family, in the interest of identifying a meaningful, safe approach to acknowledging the loss.

Memorial Services Memorials involving large numbers of students are strongly discouraged, as the emotions generated at such a gathering can be difficult to control. Schools should consider using their support room or chapel for reflective activities that involve smaller groups of students.

Spontaneous Memorials It is not unusual for students to want to create a spontaneous memorial in the aftermath of a student's death. In these instances, the school will have to balance the students' need to grieve with ensuring that death is not glamorized. Although it may in some cases be necessary to set limits for students, it is important to do so with compassion and sensitivity, offering creative suggestions whenever possible; for example, schools may wish to set up a memory book, or make poster board and markers available, so that students can gather and write messages. It is advisable to set these up in an area that may be avoided by those who don't wish to participate (i.e., in the chapel or library, rather than the cafeteria or front foyer). Schools may leave such memorials in place until after the funeral (or for up to approximately five days) after which time, they should be respectfully removed. The tribute objects may be offered to the family. A combination of time limits and straightforward communication can help to restore equilibrium and avoid glamorizing the death in ways that may increase the risk of contagion.

When a spontaneous memorial occurs off school grounds, the school's ability to exert influence is limited. However, the school can encourage a responsible approach among the students, explaining that it is recommended that memorials be removed within a reasonable time frame, (i.e., right after the funeral, or within approximately five days).

Schools must discourage requests to create and distribute t-shirts, (or other items) bearing images of the deceased by explaining that, while these items may be comforting to some students, they may be quite upsetting to others. Energies to memorialize should be channeled into constructive events that can help the living, for example, schools might encourage students to organize a fundraising event in support of Kids Help Phone.

Flag As per board Policy PO424, flying the flag at half-mast is appropriate to recognize a student loss. The flag can remain lowered until after the funeral (or for up to approximately five days).

Yearbooks Dedicating a page in the yearbook to students who have died that school year is not a recommended practice. However, if there is a history of this practice, then it is equally applicable to a student who has died by suicide. Final editorial decisions must be made by an adult. The fact that the student died by suicide must **not** be mentioned.

Graduation If there is a history of including a tribute to deceased students who have died that school year, then students who have died by suicide should also be included. It is not appropriate, in either case, to mention the cause of death. Briefly acknowledge any deaths toward the beginning of an event, and then move on.

Permanent Memorials and Scholarships Some school communities may wish to establish a permanent memorial, such as a tree, bench or plaque, or something commemorative like a scholarship. Permanent memorials can be upsetting reminders to students and can disrupt a school's goal of maintaining normal routines and emotional regulation for its students. Schools should also bear in mind that once it has established a permanent memorial or scholarship for one deceased student, it should be prepared to do so for others. This can become quite difficult to sustain over time. **It is not appropriate to set up a permanent memorial on school property.**

Anniversaries As with deaths from any cause, the anniversary of a death, or the birthday of someone deceased are occasions that can take friends and family members back to their original levels of mourning. Being prepared for this possibility is a significant long term postvention responsibility. Staff should be prepared to monitor and support students at that time. The postvention team may consider a follow-up visit on the anniversary date. Again, discourage large group memorials. These occasions are best handled in very small groups, with the knowledge and consent of the family, and where an adult can be close by, if not actually present.

Appendix A: Key Messages for Media

The reporting of suicide must be handled with care, as media coverage can increase suicide contagion. DCDSB Communications will act as the media liaison. This will help ensure that a consistent message is shared, and that the Director of Education is aware of all inquiries. The Director and/or DCDSB Communications may designate an on-site media spokesperson.

	Key Messages
When cause of death has not been confirmed or parent(s)/guardian(s) have not given consent to disclose cause of death as suicide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, the school experienced a tragic loss. • Our prayers are with the family at this difficult time. • We are respecting the family’s wishes for privacy. • At this point, we are putting in place supports for students dealing with the loss, including grief counseling for students in need and extra time with our guidance department, e.g., special considerations for exams. • Media can help us help youth by letting them know about the types of supports that are available to them. • We are focusing on the positive aspects of [name]’s life.
When cause of death has been confirmed as a suicide AND only if the family has given consent to talk about the death as a suicide: If this is the case, brief factual information can be released. Do not disclose details about how the death occurred.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, the school experienced a tragic loss. • Yes, [name] died by suicide. • Our prayers are with [name]’s family and friends at this difficult time. • At this point, we are putting in place supports for students dealing with the death, including grief counseling for students in need and extra time with our guidance department, e.g., special considerations for exams. • We know there is a risk of contagion in young people, so we are putting in extra supports for vulnerable students. We would ask the media to respect safe reporting guidelines, which can be found at: https://www.suicideprevention.ca/Media. • It is critical to provide only brief factual information. • Media can help us help youth by letting them know about community supports and helplines, such as Kids Help Phone. • We are focusing on the positive aspects of [name]’s life.
For queries about the nature of crisis intervention supports in the schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The System Level Crisis Response Team is on site. They will work with staff, assisting them on how to best support students, and helping students who need additional levels of support. • We are helping staff and students understand that grief is part of a natural process. Some people may need more support for their distress, and this will be responded to individually. • We closely monitor those students who are closest to this loss or have recently experienced loss. • We will support the school for as long as necessary. • We will support the school with communication to families that respects the privacy of the grieving family and assists parent(s)/guardian(s) with their children.

<p>For queries that imply the school isn't doing enough to respond to the tragedy:</p> <p>Why isn't there going to be a memorial at the school? Students report there has been no assembly, why not? Why don't you bring in guest speakers on this topic of suicide?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In this kind of work there are helpful and harmful actions. An example of a harmful action would be any action that focuses speculation on the details of the death and the circumstances leading up to it. • One of the reasons we do not hold an assembly is the possible contagion effect and other potentially negative consequences. • Instead, we focus on interventions such as small group discussions, individual conversations, and building staff capacity.
<p>Could the school have done more to prevent this death?</p> <p>The question may not be phrased this directly, but could be implied; note that caution is needed in situations where the family does not want the nature of the death reported.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To protect the privacy of the family, we cannot discuss personal information about [name]. • We can tell you that our school has a long history of a strong, caring Catholic culture. Our staff strive to be caring adults in the lives of our students, providing a faith-filled environment, a listening ear and offering support as needed. • We have a safe and welcoming school program that includes evidence-based anti-bullying initiatives, including peer mediation and restorative practices. • Some staff members have been trained in mental health literacy, and selected staff members in key positions have received "gatekeeper training" to help students who report suicidal thoughts and behavior. While educators are not mental health professionals, we do our best to be sensitive to the social-emotional needs of our students and point them in the direction of professional care when issues come to our attention. • We work closely with our community partners to support the children and youth we serve.

Use the opportunity in speaking with media to highlight safe reporting guidelines for death by suicide and to model appropriate language (e.g., "died by suicide" rather than "committed suicide").

Appendix B: Guide to Parent/Guardian Phone Call

The Principal (or designate) will call the parent(s)/guardian(s) to offer condolences and support and to determine their wishes regarding communication about the death.

Offer Condolences and Support

- Express condolences on behalf of yourself and the school community.
- Offer any support that the school community can give. Student Services support can be offered when, and if, appropriate.
- Share that as a community we will pray for the family.

Determine Wishes Regarding Communication

- The needs of the family take precedence over the school's perceived need to communicate specific details. Families may require additional time to notify those closest to them before information is shared at the school.
- Wishes regarding any communication shared by the school **must** come directly from the parent(s)/guardian(s). This permission needs to be sought at an appropriate time.
- If and when parent(s)/guardian(s) chose to share information about the cause of death, funeral arrangements or any other details, you will need to determine who this information can be shared with.

What information is the family requesting be shared? _____

With whom is the family requesting this information be shared?

- School staff (all? some?) _____
- Students (all? some?) _____
- Letter to school community, i.e., parents (all? some?) _____
- Staff at school where siblings of deceased student attend _____
- Other school(s) that the student had recently attended (e.g., a high school student's previous elementary school; an alternate education site) _____

Notes: _____

Timeline regarding follow-up phone call _____

Parent(s)/guardian(s) wishes regarding communication about the death must be honoured, regardless of communication by external sources. Under no circumstance will the method of suicide be shared, as this can raise suicide risk among vulnerable youth.

Appendix C: Points to Cover in Initial Staff Meeting

- Be sure that **all** members of staff are invited. Consideration should be given to having the parish priest attend the staff meeting.
- Introduce members of the System-Level Crisis Response Team.
- Share accurate information about the death, reading the appropriate statement, (either Statement A or Statement B below) taking into account whether or not the cause of death **has been confirmed** as suicide, and whether or not the parent(s)/ guardian(s) **have given permission** to share information related to cause of death with staff and/or with students.

Statement A: When the death has been ruled a suicide and parent(s)/guardian(s) have given permission to share:

One of our students died suddenly on [date]. It has been confirmed that [name] died by suicide. Some of our students already know about this incident and we expect them to be talking about it at school (as they've been doing online). It's important for all of us to avoid speculation about the circumstances and to help curb rumours as much as possible.

There has been a lot written about best practice in suicide postvention. Our board's Suicide Postvention protocol is based on the most current research and evidence. As front-line staff, it's **especially important not to discuss the method of suicide with students because we know that providing a detailed description of how a youth died can raise suicide risk among other vulnerable young people.** I know I can count on your professionalism.

OR

Statement B: When the cause of death is undetermined and/or parent(s)/guardian(s) have not given permission to share cause of death (but suicide is suspected and rumours are circulating):

One of our students, [name] died suddenly on [date]. The **cause of death has not been determined OR family has not given permission to disclose cause of death.** Some of our students already know about this incident and we expect them to be talking about it at school (as they've been doing online).

We understand that there are rumours circulating that [name] died by suicide. It's important for all of us to avoid speculation about the circumstances and to help curb rumours as much as possible. If students ask you directly, it's important that you tell them that we can confirm only the facts that are known to us.

If we do learn that this was a suicide, we will be following procedures as outlined in our board's Suicide Postvention protocol, which emphasizes that it's **especially important not to discuss the method of suicide with students because we know that providing a detailed description of how a youth died can raise suicide risk among other vulnerable young people.** I know I can count on your professionalism.

- Provide staff with scripted statement (based on [Appendix D](#)) to read to students informing them of the death. **The script must be read in classrooms, NOT in a large assembly or over the PA system.** Encourage staff to practice reading the announcement before reading to students. Arrange coverage for any staff who are unable to manage reading the statement, or unable to immediately resume teaching duties.
- Prepare for student reactions and questions by discussing the issue with staff. If appropriate, provide staff with the two-page handout: [Talking Points for Staff and Students After a Suicide \(Appendix E\)](#), which provides guidelines for educators in discussing factual, emotional and spiritual concerns that may need to be addressed.
- Explain plans for the day, including locations of designated “support rooms.”
- Brief staff about identifying and referring at-risk students. The System-Level Crisis Response Team will provide practical and emotional support for students who require it. They may also provide counselling support for specific students who are identified as being at risk or most vulnerable. This may include (but not limited to):
 - Closest friends or siblings of the student
 - Any student who may have witnessed the suicide
 - Students with a history of suicide attempts
 - Students who are or have been, accessing mental health services for depression, suicide ideation or self-harm
 - Students known to be struggling with grief or trauma related to other events
 - Students who are expressing guilt about “messages” that they were given by the student, but did not act on or share with an adult
 - Students who had a recent conflict with the student prior to the death
- Advise staff that if they have specific concerns about a student’s behaviour (e.g., extremely upset response) they should report this right away, and appropriate supports will be arranged.
- Instruct staff not to talk to the media, and that any media inquiries are to be handled by DCDSB Communications.
- Remind staff of supports available through Family Services Employee Assistance Program, (FSEAP) and the need for self-care.
- Conclude meeting with a prayer (see [Appendix F for Prayer Resources](#)).

Appendix D: Student Announcements

This appendix is to be used to create an appropriate script and plan for sharing information with students. This script may need to be adjusted, depending on the age of the students. The announcement should only include the facts as they have been officially communicated to the school. Other information should not be shared or speculated upon.

This announcement will be shared **in individual classrooms**, NOT in a large assembly or over the PA system.

Sample Script A - permission HAS been given to share suicide as cause of death:

Today is a very sad day for the [school name] community because [name], a Grade ___ student in our school, died very suddenly on [date]. [name] died by suicide. A death by suicide presents us with many questions that we may not be able to answer right away. Rumours may begin to circulate in the community and on social media, and we ask that you not spread rumors you may hear. We'll do our best to give you accurate information as it becomes known to us. It's important to know that suicide is a very complicated act. We know that it is often related to an underlying mental health difficulty, such as depression that can prevent a person from thinking clearly about his or her problems and how to solve them. Sometimes these difficulties are not identified or noticed. One thing is certain: there are treatments that can help. Suicide is never the answer.

Sample Script B- permission HAS NOT been given, or cause of death is undetermined:

Today is a very sad day for the [school name] community because [name], a Grade ___ student in our school, died very suddenly on [date]. This is the only information we have officially received on the circumstances surrounding the death. Rumours may begin to circulate in the community and on social media, and we ask that you not spread rumours you may hear. We'll do our best to give you accurate information as it becomes known to us.

If you need to talk to someone today, we have a number of counsellors and support staff from the school board who are here to help and provide support to students who need it. They are in (location). If you need to visit them, please make arrangements with your teacher. The counsellors will be here as long as they are needed.

[Name]'s death comes as a great shock to us all and we are going to miss [name] as part of our school family. The [family name] family will need our prayers and gestures of support. Please remember [name] and the [family name] family as we pray together:

Heavenly Father,

Ggenerously extend to us your compassion as we mourn the loss of one of our own. Bless the [family name] family and help us all to provide each other with the signs of love and support we may all need at this time of sorrow.

May each of us work toward bringing God's peace and comfort to our school community, and may each of our acts of kindness and support be a means by which your love is made known.

~Amen~

Appendix E: Talking Points for Staff and Students After a Death by Suicide

Talking Points	What to say
<p>Give accurate information about suicide. Suicide is complicated. Help students understand the complexities.</p>	<p>“Suicide is not caused by a single event such as fighting with parent(s)/guardian(s), or a bad grade, or the break-up of a relationship.”</p> <p>“Suicide is often caused by mental health disorders like depression or substance abuse problems that may or may not have been identified. Mental health disorders affect the way people feel and can prevent them from thinking clearly and rationally about how to solve problems. Having a mental health disorder is nothing to be ashamed of.”</p> <p>“There are effective treatments to help people who have mental health disorders or substance abuse problems. Suicide is never the answer.”</p>
<p>Address blame and scapegoating. It is common to try to answer the question ‘why’ by blaming others for the suicide.</p>	<p>“Blaming others for the suicide is wrong, and it’s not fair. Doing that can hurt another person deeply.”</p>
<p>Do not talk about the method. Talking about the method can create images that are upsetting and it may increase the risk of imitative behavior by vulnerable youth.</p>	<p>“Let’s focus on talking about the feelings we are left with after _____’s death and figure out the best way to manage them. “</p>
<p>Address anger. Accept expressions of anger at the deceased. Help students know these feelings are normal.</p>	<p>“It’s OK to feel angry. These feelings are normal, and it doesn’t mean that you didn’t care about _____. You can be angry at someone’s behavior and still care deeply about that person.”</p>
<p>Address feelings of responsibility. Help students understand that the only person responsible for the suicide is the deceased. Reassure those who have exaggerated feelings of responsibility, such as thinking they should have done something to save the deceased or see the signs.</p>	<p>“This death is not your fault. We cannot always see the signs because a person who is suicidal may hide them well.”</p> <p>“Suicide is very complex. No one person is ever responsible for causing or preventing a suicide.”</p> <p>“We cannot always predict someone’s behavior.”</p>
<p>Encourage help-seeking. Encourage students to seek help from a trusted adult if they or a friend are feeling depressed or suicidal.</p>	<p>“We are always here to help you through any problem, no matter what. Who are the people you would go to if you or a friend were feeling worried, depressed, or had thoughts of suicide?”</p>

Continued.....

Talking Points	What to say
<p>Be a good faith model for students who have moral questions about suicide.</p> <p>Be knowledgeable about Church teaching, and take a pastoral approach. Beware of potentially harmful statements which presume to judge the moral state or eternal destiny of a person who dies by suicide. ¹</p> <p>Emphasize that Catholic teaching stresses the sacredness of human life, and our call to value and protect it.²</p> <p>Focus on the infinite love and mercy of God for all his children, especially those who suffer in any way from illness of body, mind or spirit.³ As people of faith, members of the one body of Christ, when one person faces mental illness or loss of any kind, we are all impacted, and so we are called to pray and to reach out in compassion.⁴</p>	<p>“We should view those who have died by suicide with compassion and mercy because we cannot understand the pain that they were enduring when they made such a drastic choice. Only God knows the mind of the person and God is all-loving and merciful.”</p> <p>“While suicide can be considered contrary to the fifth commandment, still the church’s response is compassion, not condemnation. “</p> <p>“Those who die by suicide can be saved and go to heaven. They can be given a Catholic funeral, both mass and Christian burial, and Catholics are encouraged to pray for them. “</p> <p>“We also need to be present to one another in our grief, and make sure those who are hurting get support.”</p>

Adapted from: AFSP. After a Suicide: A toolkit for schools. Newton, MA: Education Development Centre, Inc. Available online at <http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/AfteraSuicideToolkitforSchools.pdf>

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd Ed) 2283

² Ibid. 2280

³ Ibid. 2282, 2283, Romans 8: 31-39

⁴ Ibid. 2281 and 1 Corinthians 12: 26,

Some Faith Resources:

<http://ronrolheiser.com/search/?q=Suicide&search=Search>

<http://www.catholicdigest.com/articles/faith/knowledge/2007/04-01/do-people-who-commit-suicide-go-to-hell>

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm

Appendix F: Prayer Resources

Sample Prayer 1

Dear God,

We come together this morning to offer our prayers for_____. We also pray in this time of tragedy for the family of _____ that they may be comforted in faith and in friendship. Dear God, we often witness tragedies that do not make sense to us. But we come to you in thanksgiving for the love and support you have shown us through the compassion of those around us. We know that there are difficult times ahead. However, we also know you are always there for us. May each of us work toward bringing God's peace and comfort to our school community, and may each of our acts of kindness and support be a means by which your love is made known.

Amen

Sample Prayer 2

We thank you, O God, for the life of _____;

For the friendship that they shared so abundantly,

For the warmth of their laughter,

For the joy of their presence,

For the easy conversation that they enjoyed with family and friends,

For the generous sharing of their thoughts and feelings,

For their openness and direct way,

For their compassion for their family and friends,

For the spontaneity of their heart and generosity of their soul,

For companionship they gave and the many years spent together,

For the wondrous beauty of their lives.

For these and all the blessings that _____ gave to all who knew them.

We give you thanks, O God of Love.

Amen

For additional Prayer Resources refer to Responding to Critical Incidents and Traumatic Events (R.2018), page 71

Appendix G: Office Staff Instructions

Never speculate or provide information, which could jeopardize a police investigation or violate the family's right to privacy and confidentiality.

- 1) Take messages for all non-crisis related calls.
- 2) For crisis-related calls:
 - **Police:** immediately transfer to Principal or designate
 - **Family members of deceased:** immediately transfer to Principal or designate. If Principal is not immediately available, ask if they would like to speak to a member of the Crisis Response Team.
 - **Parent(s)/guardian(s) of other students calling for information about the death:** inform them that a student passed away suddenly. Members of the board's System Level Crisis Response Team are here to support students and staff, and will remain at our school for as long as they are needed. If they have further questions or concerns, take a message.
- 3) **If parent(s)/guardian(s) arrive unannounced on the scene:** ensure a space has been set aside for them to wait and get information. If parent(s)/guardian(s) want to take a student home, ensure they follow school procedures for signing out.
- 4) **For media inquiries:** refer media to DCDSB Communications.

Note: DCDSB Communication will act as the media liaison. This will help ensure that a consistent message is shared and that the Director of Education is aware of all inquiries. The Director and/or DCDSB Communications may designate an on-site media spokesperson.

Appendix H: Sample Letter for School Community

(Suicide not Confirmed)

***When suicide has NOT been confirmed as the cause of death and/or parent(s)/guardian(s) have NOT given permission to share cause of death with school community.**

Note that consent from the parent(s)/guardian(s) is always required prior to any information being shared.

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

It is with great sadness that we inform you of the recent sudden death of one of our [Grade ___ students, \[name\]](#). I have offered our deepest sympathy to [\[name\]'s](#) parents.

Our students were informed about this loss by their teachers today. Support was available to students by school staff and a team of counsellors from the school board were present today to assist in supporting our students. These individuals will be in place as long as they are needed. If any parents would like to talk to these counsellors, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me.

Young people respond to death in unique ways, and a wide range of reactions are possible. If you are concerned about your child's reaction and behaviour, please let your child's teacher, myself or a member of the school team know. If you are worried about the immediate safety of your child, Durham Region Crisis Response can be accessed by calling 905-666-0483 or 1-800-742-1890.

Again, we express our sincere sympathy to the [\[family name\]](#) family. Please keep them in your thoughts and prayers. If there is anything we can do to help students or parents, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me.

Sincerely,

[Principal name]

Eternal rest grant unto [him/her](#), O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon [him/her](#). May [his/her](#) soul and all the souls of the faithfully departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

Amen

Appendix I: Sample Letter for School Community

(Suicide Confirmed)

**** When suicide has been confirmed as the cause of death AND parent(s)/guardian(s) have given permission to disclose this to school community.**

Note that consent from the parent(s)/guardian(s) is always required prior to any information being shared.

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

It is with great sadness that we inform you that [one of our Grade __ students/ staff members] died by suicide. [name]'s death comes as a tragic loss to our entire community. I have offered our deepest sympathy to [name]'s family.

Our students were informed about this loss by their teachers today. Support was available to students by school staff and a team of counsellors from the school board were present today to assist in supporting our students. These individuals will be in place as long as they are needed. If any parent(s)/guardian(s) would like to talk to these counsellors, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me.

Young people respond to death in unique ways, and a wide range of reactions are possible. If you are concerned about your child's reaction and behaviour, please let your child's teacher, myself or a member of the school team know. If you are worried about the immediate safety of your child, Durham Region Crisis Response can be accessed by calling 905-666-0483 or 1-800-742-1890.

Attached to this letter you will find a two-page handout **Suicide in Schools: Information for Parents/Guardians** and **Talking Points for Parents/Guardians After a Suicide**. These handouts provide factual information, as well as tips for communicating with your child/teen about this tragic event.

Again, we express our sincere sympathy to the [family name] family. Please keep them in your thoughts and prayers. If there is anything we can do to help students or parents, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me.

Sincerely,

[Principal name]

Eternal rest grant unto him/her, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him/her. May his/her soul and all the souls of the faithfully departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace

Amen

Appendix J: Suicide in Schools - Information for Parents/Guardians

You have been made aware that a suicide has occurred at your child's school. This is a very sad and traumatic event for all students, staff, parent(s)/guardian(s) and the wider school community. Here is some information that may be helpful in assisting you and your child to manage during this difficult time.

Young people respond to suicide in unique ways and a wide range of reactions is possible. Your child's response will be influenced by their personality, their relationship with the deceased person, what is happening in their life and their ability to adjust to change. They may feel confusion, anger, aggression, withdrawal, fear, guilt, denial, blame, betrayal, abandonment, hurt and/or sadness. If you're concerned about your child's reaction and behaviour (such as changes in his/her socializing or school work) it is important to speak to his/her teacher, the principal, or your family physician. If you're worried about the immediate safety of your child, **Durham Region Crisis Response** can be accessed by calling 905-666-0483 or 1-800-742-1890.

Parental understanding, reassurance and attention are very important at this time. Be guided by your child's need to talk and make it clear to them that you will be available whenever they need you. Young people who have experienced other stressful situations in their lives (e.g., the separation/divorce of parent(s)/guardian(s), the death of a relative/pet, moving house/school) may find it harder to cope. They may become upset and need to express their feelings about these other concerns, even if they had appeared to be coping. If your child is already using the services of a psychologist or counsellor, make them aware of the suicide. Your child may have a lot of questions. They may want to know exactly what happened. While we have provided students with general information, details about the way the suicide occurred will **not** be given to students, as this information is potentially harmful to their well-being. As parent(s)/ guardian(s), it is important to steer discussion towards the positive "help-seeking" actions which young people can take. This includes talking to a trusted adult, such as a parent/guardian, counsellor, teacher, relative or friend.

Adolescents often share their feelings about death with friends in conversations, e-mails, text messages and through social media. Young people should encourage help-seeking in any friends they have concerns about. "Tell an adult if you are worried about a friend." This is an important message to share with your child. If they have concerns about a friend, they should tell an adult immediately.

Be aware that school staff will also be affected. While everyone will be working towards normalizing school routines, some staff will be managing difficult emotions. Adult counselling support is available to all school staff through a process outside the school.

Respond to community concern with respect. When you speak with other members of the community, reinforce that the best approach is to: respect the bereaved/affected family; avoid glamourizing or sensationalizing suicide; encourage help-seeking actions in young people.

Appendix K: Talking Points for Parents/Guardians After a Death by Suicide

Talking Points	What to say
<p>Give accurate information about suicide. Suicide is complicated. Help your child/teen understand the complexities.</p>	<p>“Suicide is not caused by a single event such as fighting with parent(s)/guardian(s), a bad grade, or the break-up of a relationship.”</p> <p>“Suicide is often caused by mental health disorders like depression or substance abuse problems that may or may not have been identified. Mental health disorders affect the way people feel and can prevent them from thinking clearly and rationally about how to solve problems. Having a mental health disorder is nothing to be ashamed of.”</p> <p>“There are effective treatments to help people who have mental health disorders or substance abuse problems. Suicide is never the answer.”</p>
<p>Address blame and scapegoating. It is common to try to answer the question ‘why’ by blaming others for the suicide.</p>	<p>“Blaming others for the suicide is wrong, and it’s not fair. Doing that can hurt another person deeply.”</p>
<p>Do not talk about the method. Talking about the method can create images that are upsetting and it may increase the risk of imitative behavior by vulnerable youth.</p>	<p>“Let’s focus on talking about the feelings we are left with after _____’s death and figure out the best way to manage them.”</p>
<p>Address anger. Accept expressions of anger at the deceased. Help your child/teen know these feelings are normal.</p>	<p>“It’s OK to feel angry. These feelings are normal, and it doesn’t mean that you didn’t care about _____. You can be angry at someone’s behavior and still care deeply about that person.”</p>
<p>Address feelings of responsibility. Help your child/teen understand that the only person responsible for the suicide is the deceased. Reassure your child/teen if they have exaggerated feelings of responsibility, such as thinking they should have done something to save the deceased or see the signs.</p>	<p>“This death is not your fault. We cannot always see the signs because a person who is suicidal may hide them well.”</p> <p>“Suicide is very complex. No one person is ever responsible for causing or preventing a suicide.”</p> <p>“We cannot always predict someone’s behavior.”</p>
<p>Encourage help-seeking. Encourage your child/teen to seek help from a trusted adult if they or a friend are feeling depressed or having thoughts of suicide.</p>	<p>“We are always here to help you through any problem, no matter what. Who are the people you would go to if you or a friend were feeling worried, depressed, or had thoughts of suicide?”</p>
<p>Be a good faith model for your child. As your child’s/teen’s primary model and teacher of faith, encourage them in prayer for the deceased, for themselves, the family and community.</p>	<p>We recommend that you speak authentically from your heart, in your own words. It may help to recall gospel stories that show how Jesus and his Blessed Mother understood human sorrow. In prayer, we can ask Jesus and his Blessed Mother for guidance, wisdom, comfort and hope in the resurrection.</p>

Adapted from: AFSP. After a Suicide: A toolkit for schools. Newton, MA: Education Development Centre, Inc.

Available online at <http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/AfteraSuicideToolkitforSchools.pdf>

Appendix L: Tip Sheet for Staff in Response to a Critical Incident

- Be patient with yourself. Don't try to avoid grief. You may try to "just forget about it" or feel that you need to "get over it." Most of the time, feelings won't go away unless you start sharing them. Grief postponed is acceptance postponed.
- Express your thoughts and feelings. Crying is healthy.
- Grief is erratic. It will come and go. If you let yourself deal with the grief, eventually you will feel better.
- Rise above blame. Anger and bitterness are unproductive and deplete energy.
- Let others help you. Make contact with friends, family and colleagues, and share your feelings and thoughts.
- Set realistic expectations for yourself. Reach out and ask for help. Don't assume other people know what you need. It's a sign of strength to ask for help. If you're having difficulty coping with your classes or other responsibilities, talk to a member of the Administration team.
- Remember that we have a Family Services Employee Assistance Program (FSEAP) through DCDSB that you can access for additional assistance. The help is free and confidential.
- Be there for others and realize that others are available to help and support you. Helping other people cope with their feelings also helps you deal with yours.
- Seek spiritual and grief support from the advisors available to you (e.g., Priest, Chaplain, Adult Faith Animator, Principal, a trusted mentor). Take time for personal and/or communal prayer, and for activities that you find life-giving to help you balance (e.g., exercise, music, dancing, playing, reading, being outside in nature, spending quality time with loved ones).
- Try to avoid negative coping mechanisms, such as:
 - overeating
 - excessive alcohol consumption
 - taking on more responsibilities or activities to keep busy so you won't have to think
 - hesitating to connect with people because you're afraid of bothering them

There can sometimes be long-term effects from this type of incident. If you find you're persistently experiencing: feelings of sadness, helplessness, hopelessness, irritability, numbness, difficulty concentrating, sleeplessness, nightmares, an inability to stop negative or repeated thoughts about the event, or persistent physical discomfort like tremors, shakiness, nausea, stomach aches, headaches, you may wish to contact your family doctor or the board Family Services Employee Assistance Program (FSEAP).

It's very important for you to take care of yourself and each other during this time. It's essential that we deal with our emotional and spiritual needs. The students will only do as well as the staff are doing.

Resources and Acknowledgements

The DCDSB Suicide Postvention Protocol has been informed by the following sources:

Youth Suicide Prevention at School: A Resource for School Mental Health Leadership Teams (School Mental Health ASSIST), Fall 2013

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Center (2011). *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*. Newton, MA: Education Development Center, Inc.
<http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/AfteraSuicideToolkitforSchools.pdf>

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Headspace School Support (2012). *Suicide Postvention Toolkit – A Guide for Secondary Schools*. Australian Government, National Youth Mental Health Foundation Ltd.
<http://www.headspace.org.au/media/274777/hsp040%20postvention%20toolkit%20final.pdf>

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