

Responding to the Media

Publicity about the suicide should be minimized as much as possible, especially coverage that tends to sensationalize or glamorize the suicide. A school spokesperson should be appointed to insure consistency and accuracy of information. This spokesperson usually is the principal, the crisis team coordinator, or the designee of the principal. In small school districts the superintendent may choose to act as spokesperson. The advantage of having a superintendent act as spokesperson is to relieve the school of this task and allow the school staff to deal with the crisis. If there is a community coordination committee, there should be close communication between the committee's spokesperson and the local school spokesperson. Involving the local newspaper editor, or designee, as a part of the community coordinating committee, facilitates the cooperation of the press and other media. The school secretary or another designated person should have a fact sheet from which to respond to telephone inquiries when the spokesperson is unavailable.

Never refuse a request for information **from** the press. This only inflames anger and adds to confusion. Reporters should not, however, be given access to school grounds. Filming or interviewing students or staff on school grounds should be prohibited, as the process of filming is likely to be intrusive and distressing. The spokesperson needs to respond to the media in a timely and professional manner. However, the school should avoid becoming the principal source of information. Releasing details about the suicide is the responsibility of the medical examiner or other authorities. Never permit speculation as to why the student or faculty member committed suicide. It is the family's sole prerogative to provide information about the victim. The school can explain the positive steps of the postvention plan to help students through the crisis and provide information on where troubled youth can get help. This becomes especially important in circumstances where the suicide becomes a major news story and the focus needs to be shifted from the school to the larger community.

Source: "*Suicide Postvention Guidelines*", 2nd edition, published by American Association of Suicidology, http://www.helppromotehope.com/resources/images/School_Crisis_Plan.pdf

Sample Formal Statement to Notify Media of Suicide

_____ High School is sad to report that it has confirmed the death of one of its students, _____, with the medical examiner's office and the deceased's family.

_____ (first name), a ____ -year-old (age) _____ (grade), died _____ (day) [died by suicide].

He/she was a resident of _____ and was active in _____ at the school. Funeral arrangements are not available at this time. School counselors and community mental health representatives are available to any student who wishes to talk about _____'s death.

- List community resources
- List ways the media can be helpful with postvention

Sample Response to Incoming Calls from Media

The school has designated a media spokesperson. Please feel free to contact _____ with your questions and concerns. We would like to respond to your questions in an organized manner. To assist you, _____ (name) will be meeting with concerned members of the media at _____ (time) in _____ (place). At that time we will provide information about the school's response to our loss and identify additional resources in the community to support the bereaved.

Source: "School-based Youth Suicide Prevention guide," published by the Department of Child and Family Studies, Division of State and Local Support, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, University of South Florida, 2003, accessed at www.fmhi.usf.edu/institute/pubs/bysubject.html