

## GIVING SUPPORT TO STUDENTS

As discussed previously, teachers can make a meaningful difference in times of grief by establishing an authentic and supportive connection with students. The following are some steps that will be especially useful when a school is reacting to a death in their community.<sup>3</sup> Most of these will sound familiar because they are similar to the steps recommended for individual students experiencing grief.

- *Know the guidelines of the school for these situations.* Schools should make guidelines available to teachers through an Intranet site or written documents, or in other ways. Every teacher should have access to copies of crisis plans at any time. Familiarity with the plan should be developed through ongoing training and exercises. If the school does not have crisis plans in place, teachers should advocate for their development.
- *Remember that any student may be deeply affected.* It is impossible to know the experiences of every student. Any student may be deeply affected by a death, so it is important that teachers speak sensitively about the incident to all students.
- *Be approachable.* Teachers who can talk about complex and difficult topics, including death and grief, are more likely to be approached by students looking for support. Teachers should take opportunities to discuss these matters in an open, authentic manner; for example, by talking with a class about common grief reactions or by discussing how receiving support for troublesome feelings can be helpful.
- *Listen.* When students want to share, it can be especially powerful for them simply to have an attentive listener. The focus should be on them.
- *Protect students.* Teachers should take steps to protect students from being retraumatized about the death. Emotionally expressive students might be teased by others for crying. Reporters might want to talk to students about the death. A television in a common area might be tuned to a news station repeating details about the death.
- *Make connections.* The strategies described in Chapter 5 can be used to make authentic and positive connections with students. Teachers should invite them to talk about their thoughts and experiences.
- *Teach about grief and normalize receiving support.* Teachers can help students understand common reactions to grief, including having strong feelings, being confused, feeling out of control, and so forth. They can emphasize the importance of reaching out for support and the power of giving support to others. Teachers can also include suggestions about when seeking help is especially important (e.g., when troublesome feelings persist or get worse) and provide resources (e.g., the support room set up by the school after a crisis).
- *Be a positive role model.* It is okay for students to see their teachers' emotions, as well as some of the ways they are coping with their feelings. This helps them understand how to express their own feelings and come up with strategies for coping. For example, a teacher might say to her class, "I was shocked when

I heard the news, and I just felt like crying.” Or, “When I heard about the car crash, I felt frightened. I was even nervous when I got in the car this morning.” Then the teacher could offer an example of coping. “After I cried, I talked to my husband (or sister, friend), and it helped me feel better. Who is someone you could talk to if you were feeling sad?” Or, “I took a couple of deep breaths, made sure my seatbelt was fastened, and was very attentive the whole time I drove here.”

- *Watch for signs of distress now and over time.* Teachers can use the guidelines that were reviewed in Chapter 7 to identify students showing signs of distress. They should then provide referrals when appropriate. Although a school crisis plan, including drop-in counseling support, may be in place for a week or so, powerful feelings might come up for some students for weeks, months, or even a year or more after the incident.
- *Seek personal support.* These experiences are deeply emotional for teachers. Crisis response plans should provide support for them as well. Teachers should consider visiting the staff support room or talking with one of the counselors even if they do *not* feel a strong need to do so. This provides good role modeling for students and colleagues. We also find this type of support helpful for people who are coping well with a loss, and we recommend it to teachers who have worked in a school setting that has experienced a crisis or death.

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