



# *Critical Incident Plan*

## **Introduction**

Critical incidents of their very nature tend to occur without warning and at any time of the day or night. This policy provides guidance for those whose task it is to manage such incidents. However, each crisis situation will demand a different set of responses.

A critical incident may be defined as any event that seriously affects members of the school community. The following list, though not exhaustive, delineates the kinds of incidents that may be categorised as critical incidents.

- Family bereavement
- Death, serious illness or serious accident involving a member of the school community
- Suicide of a member of the school community
- Serious damage to the school buildings through fire, flood, vandalism or some other cause
- Serious emergency on school premises
- Serious violence or the threat of serious violence to a member of the school community either within or without the school
- Serious injury or death of a student while involved in a school activity
- Intrusion into the school
- Disappearance of a member of the school community
- An accident or a tragedy in the wider community

## **Critical Incident Management Team**

So 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
- Chaplain
- Relevant Class Tutor
- Pastoral Care Team

## **Procedures to be Followed in the Event of a Critical Incident Occurring.**

### **1. 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 senior management of the school. However, where it is apparent that an emergency situation exists, it may be necessary to call one or other of the emergency services in the first instance.

### **2. 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 senior and involved staff gather to establish the facts – this may involve contacting Hospitals, Gardai, Emergency / Medical Services, Parents, etc.

### **3. Senior 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. This group will need to agree an immediate plan of action, which may involve:

- Informing staff and students – where feasible all staff should be informed in the first instance.
- Contacting parents
- Visiting families most intimately touched by the crisis
- Organising a school assembly / Mass
- Liaising with relevant support groups – Counsellors, Health Board, NEPS, DES, etc.
- Agreeing a factual and sensitive statement with regard to the crisis – with a view to dispelling rumours while not adding to the distress of those involved or invading their privacy.
- Assigning tasks to members of the Critical Incident Team
- Appointing person/s to handle phone inquiries and /or to deal with the media
- Organising a timetable for the school to respond to the crisis – wherever possible adhering to normal timetables and routines – while avoiding any signs of insensitivity to those touched most intimately by the crisis.
- Where a funeral is involved and the school proposes to be involved in the funeral in some way, it will be necessary to liaise with the bereaved family regarding any such involvement; it should not be automatically assumed that the family will be happy to go along with whatever the school decides. Indeed, any public actions on the part of the school at the time of any such a bereavement should be discussed with the bereaved or their representatives before being embarked upon.
- Organising a staff meeting and deciding whether or not an outside professional will be invited to that meeting. Where students are going to be in the school, it is critical that appropriate supervision be put in a place for all students whose teachers or supervisors may be involved in meetings.

#### **4. Staff Meeting**

All staff (including support staff) should be invited to the meeting. The following matters should be addressed by the meeting.

- A sensitive account of the facts as known, having regard for the privacy of those involved in the incident. Information needs to be provided on a need-to-know basis.
- The views and feelings of staff.
- How, by whom and in what setting students and other members of the school community should be informed of the incident.
- An outline of the timetable that the Critical Incident Team has drawn up for responding to the crisis – the timetable may, if necessary and feasible, be amended at this meeting.
- Details regarding the outside agencies that have been contacted and the support programme that will be put in place for staff, students and other members of the school community.
- Procedure for identifying vulnerable students.

#### **5. Informing Students**

It is important that all those needing to be informed of the incident receive the necessary information as soon as is practicable. In the course of preparing to inform students, the following matters should be taken in to account.

- It will be helpful if a common statement is agreed before students are informed.
- Consideration should be given to providing those delegated the task of informing students with an agreed script. But, of course, each person will have his/her own way of relating to his/her group of students.
- If at all possible, all students should be told at the same time in class groups no larger than normal class size.
- The ideal person to inform a group of students is someone who knows them well and has their trust. Where a member of staff indicates that he/she would be uncomfortable undertaking the task of informing a group of students, his/her view should be respected. Indeed, where a member of staff feels, for whatever reason, that he/she is unable to be involved in the school's direct response to a serious trauma, he/she should be allowed to opt out readily.
- Clear unambiguous information (the facts as they are known) will reduce the spread of rumour. However, it is important to recognise that everyone does not have to be given full details of the event. Again, information needs to be provided on a need-to-know basis.
- Details of a critical incident will obviously need to be communicated to a group of students in a sensitive manner and those informing a group of students should check the list of those they are informing carefully and note if there are any students in the group who are likely to be more seriously affected by the information than others.
- Those informing students of the details of the incident should spend a reasonable amount of time with the students to allow them to react to news of the incident. Where news of the death of a member of the school community is being communicated to students, it should be acknowledged that young and old will all find it difficult to cope with the sad news and that support will be provided through the Chaplain, the Guidance Counsellor and other support services.

- The statement should highlight the support that will be available to students in respect of the incident – both in the immediate and longer term.
- Where a clear plan of action has been agreed in respect of the incident this should be conveyed to the students. Where a plan is in the process of being prepared the students should also be advised of this and of the time/date that they may expect to be advised of the details of such a plan.
- In the case of a suspected suicide, great care should be taken not to use the term “suicide” until it has been established categorically that the student’s death was as a result of suicide. Even then, it is important to respect the privacy and sensitivity of the deceased’s family and friends.

## **6. Where an Accident has Occurred on a School Activity / Trip**

Different situations will call for different responses but the following points should be considered.

- The preparation of a clear statement to assist those contacting the relatives of those who have been injured or affected by the incident.
- It is preferable to have a group of people involved so that all concerned are informed in or around the same time.
- Those contacted should be offered as much practical help as possible – transport, phone numbers, relevant contact persons and other resources
- Those contacting the most affected by the incident should check to see if the contacted are on their own and therefore in need of support.
- Ideally, the most seriously affected should be spoken to face to face rather than by phone.
- The communication should contain some element which allows the person conveying it to check that it has been fully understood.

## **7. Liaising with the Press**

It is important that the school plan for the distinct possibility that the media will enquire about the incident, by nominating one person only to act as the spokesperson. In preparing a press statement the following issues need to be considered.

- Priority should be given to the sensitivities and needs of those affected directly by the incident.
- Other than where it is manifestly in the interest of those affected by the incident, the names, addresses and phone numbers of those affected by the crisis should not be provided to the media.
- Statements should be confined to the facts as known and conjecture should be avoided – other than where it is manifestly in the interests of those affected to speculate on what may have happened.
- Give some thought, in advance, to the kinds of question that the media are likely to ask. Where possible and practical, seek the advice of someone who has experience in dealing with the media prior to talking to the media.

- Understand that the media are not necessarily the enemy. Reporters also have a job to do and the public is entitled to information that neither impinges on the privacy of those affected by the incident nor exacerbates the incident.
- Do not feel that you have to answer a question from a reporter simply because it is asked. Where there is good reason for not answering a question, the reporter should be informed politely that you do wish to answer it.
- There are two ways in which the media may be spoken to – on the record and off the record. When a matter is put on the record, you are essentially giving the journalist the right to report what you say. On the other hand, if you speak off the record to a reporter, you are not giving them the right to report what you say. It may be good idea to, at the outset, talk to the reporter off the record and then only go on the record when you are clear on what you are happy to see reported in the media. Indeed, before initiating any discussion with a reporter, it may be prudent to clarify the issue of ‘off the record’ and ‘on the record’.
- Agree a specific time and place for media briefings – either on a once-off or on-going basis.
- A Press Statement should be simple and brief. It should, where appropriate, 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.

Again, other than where there is a clear need to do otherwise, the 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.

## **8. Others to be Informed**

Others will need to be informed of the incident in due course.

### **• Chairperson of the Board of Management**

As soon as is practical, the Chairperson of the Board of Management should be informed and it will be the responsibility of the Chairperson to decide whether an emergency meeting of the Board is necessary. Whether or not to close the school will depend on the judgment of the Chairperson and the Principal. Should it be decided to close the school, it is advisable to do so ONLY after informing the students both of the details of the incident and of the routine that the school will follow over the coming days.

### **• Parent Body**

As soon as is practical, all parents should be informed in writing of all relevant details of the incident -again on a need-to-know basis. The correspondence to parents should also provide clear information in respect of the following: how the school proposes to respond to the incident in the short, medium and long term, and how parents may assist both their own sons/daughters and other students in recovering from any trauma that the incident may have caused them.

- **School Insurers**

Some incidents may require the school to inform their insurers.

## **9. Review**

It is important to regularly review this policy and set of procedures in the light of experience. Indeed, it is particularly helpful to take time to evaluate the effectiveness of policies and procedures subsequent to their application. It is also a good idea to make contact with other schools and professionals to compare the effectiveness of their Crisis Response Policy / Plan and assess courses of action both proposed and taken.

## **9. Proactivity**

It is not sufficient to plan merely to respond to crises when they occur. Rather, it is essential that all members of the school community be provided, on an ongoing basis, with the skills, knowledge and sensitivity to prevent the occurrence of crises. This can be done through the provision of in-service for teachers and other support staff, information meetings for parents and an effective pastoral / student support structure within the school.

## **10. Critical Incident Debriefing**

As soon as is practicable after the core elements of the crisis (critical incident) have ended, the College will take every reasonable step to provide all members of the school community, who were most deeply affected by the incident/crisis, with an opportunity to participate in a critical incident debriefing programme. Furthermore, the College will seek to persuade those who may be reticent about taking part in such a programme of the advantages of taking part in it.

## **11. Conclusion:**

While it is hoped that this policy will be of assistance in the event of a crisis occurring in our school community, it is nevertheless important to recognise that this policy cannot replace the most vital qualities needed in dealing with such personal issues as suicide, bereavement and loss – the sensitivity, care and compassion we offer to one another and to our students on a daily basis.

## Principal's Checklist

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 Pastoral Team, include Year Head and Tutor of deceased student (see notes on same).
- 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 the 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 a likelihood of interest from the media discuss a strategy to deal with any such requests.

## SUICIDE – Indicators and Intervention Measures

Suicide is a particularly traumatic event in the life of any school. A study conducted in Ottawa, Canada, revealed a number of behaviours which can be exhibited by those contemplating suicide. Teachers and other support 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 final 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 (carefully).
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).

### SUICIDE

#### **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 the child's 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 youth that you are willing to discuss the subject.
8. Don't deny or cover up the youngster's feelings or intents. Don't be judgemental. 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 the youth 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 feelings.

**SCHOOL EMERGENCY CONTACT SHEET**

Contact Name Telephone

School Doctor Dr. O Connell 045 431284

Local Medical Centre Kdoc

Caredoc

1890 599 362

1850 334 999

Fire Brigade 045 431370

Gardaí 045 431212

Hospital Emergency Dept. Naas

Tallaght

St James'

Beaumont

Portaloise

045 897221

01 4142000

01 4103000

01 8379964

0502 21364

Local Clergy Priest on Duty (Parish) 087 2554908

Counselling/Bereavement

Services

Turas le Cheile

Kildare Suicide Bereavement Support

Carlow Bereavement Support

Rainbows Programme

Dochas (Blanchardstown)

Samaritans

Aware

086 0566819

045 895629

0503 51277

042 71235

01 8200915

1850 609090

01 6766166

Educational Services NEPS – Naas

NEPS – Clondalkin

045 848504

01 4614824

Voluntary Agencies

Press and Media

This list was updated on 25 January