Responding with Compassion

Tragic Events Protocol

A practical guide for supporting
students, staff, and school communities
through tragedy and loss

Northeastern Catholic District School Board

2026

Responding with Compassion

Tragic Events Protocol

Introduction

Tragic events and experiences of loss can deeply affect students, staff, families, and entire school communities. During these difficult moments, our response must be guided by compassion, sensitivity, and care for one another.

As a Catholic school community, we are called to accompany those who are grieving, offering comfort, understanding, and hope while respecting the dignity and individual needs of every person.

The Responding with Compassion: Tragic Events Protocol provides practical guidance and resources to assist school administrators and educators in responding to tragedy and loss.

Recognizing that every situation is unique, this guide offers a consistent approach while allowing for thoughtful decisions based on the circumstances and needs of those affected.

Rooted in our commitment to faith, belonging, and community, we seek to ensure that no one faces difficult moments alone.

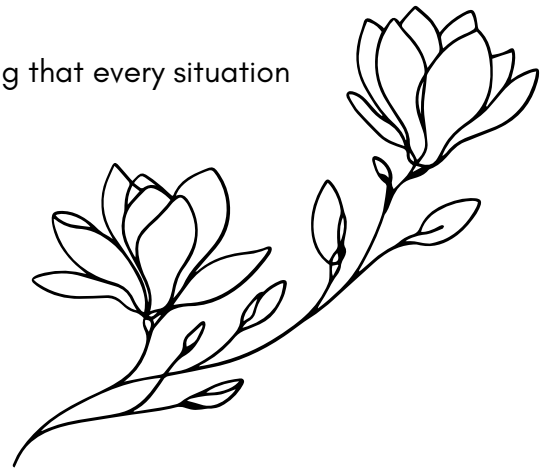
Guiding Principles

Compassion and Dignity
Respond with kindness, sensitivity, and respect for the dignity, privacy, and individual circumstances of those affected.

Faith and Hope
Draw upon our Catholic faith, values, and traditions to offer comfort, prayer, and hope while respecting the diverse beliefs and needs of our school communities.

Care and Connection
Create supportive environments where students, staff, and families feel a sense of belonging and know that help is available.

Thoughtful and Coordinated Action
Respond in a timely and coordinated manner, recognizing that every situation is unique and may require different forms of support.



When a Tragic Event Occurs

When a tragic event affects a school community, a timely, compassionate, and coordinated response is essential. Every situation is unique, and the action taken should reflect the circumstances of the event and the needs of those affected.

The following steps provide practical guidance for school administration and staff.

1 - Ensure Immediate Safety
Attend to any immediate safety concerns and contact emergency services where necessary. Ensure that students and staff are safe and appropriately supported.

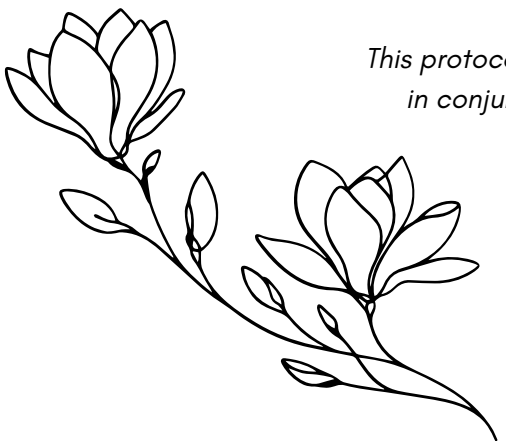
2 - Notify and Coordinate
The Principal or designate will notify the Superintendent of Education as soon as possible. Together, they will determine the appropriate response, including any additional supports or resources required.

3 - Confirm Information and Respect Privacy
Establish the facts that can be confirmed and, where appropriate, communicate with the affected family to understand their wishes. Respect confidentiality and avoid sharing unverified or unnecessary details.

4 - Communicate with Care
Develop a thoughtful communication plan in consultation with the Superintendent of Education. Determine how and when information will be shared with staff, students, and families, recognizing that some individuals may require personal notification or additional support.

5 - Provide Support
Identify students and staff who may be particularly affected and arrange appropriate supports. Maintain familiar routines where possible while allowing flexibility for those experiencing grief or distress.

6 - Plan for Ongoing Care
Continue to monitor the well-being of students and staff in the days and weeks that follow. Consider opportunities for prayer, remembrance, and additional support, respecting the wishes of those affected and the needs of the school community.



This protocol is intended to support professional judgement and should be used in conjunction with NCDSB Policy E-20 / APE020 Response to Tragic Events.

Responding to Loss

The death of a student, staff member, or loved ones can have a profound impact on a school community. While the immediate response should follow the guidance outlined in this protocol, additional considerations may help ensure that individuals receive appropriate care and support.

The following guidance should be adapted to the circumstances of each situation, respecting the wishes of the affected family and the needs of students and staff.

Death of a Student

The death of a student can deeply affect classmates, educators, and the broader school community. A thoughtful and coordinated response is important in helping individuals navigate their grief.

Considerations may include:

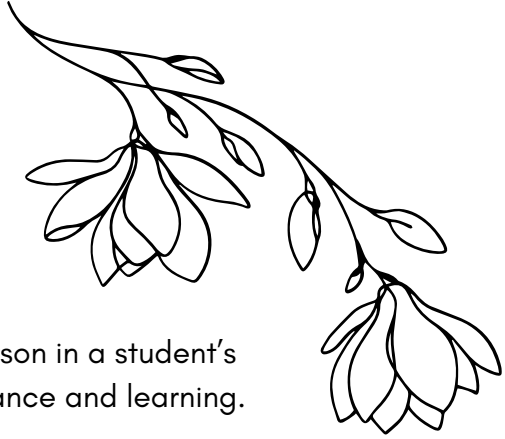
- Informing the student's teachers and other directly affected staff before communicating more broadly.
- Sharing age-appropriate information with classmates in a supportive setting, with particular attention to close friends and students who may be especially affected.
- Providing opportunities for students to express their feelings, ask questions, or access additional support.
- Maintaining familiar routines while allowing flexibility for students and staf who are grieving.
- Consulting with the family regarding funeral arrangements, expressions of sympathy, and appropriate opportunities for remembrance.
- Considering sensitive arrangements for the student's belongings, classroom space, and school records.
- Recognizing that additional supports may be needed at significant times, including birthdays, holidays, graduation, or anniversaries.

Death of a Staff Member

The death of a staff member may affect colleagues, students, families, and others who have developed meaningful relationships with the individual.

Considerations may include:

- Informing colleagues personally and providing an opportunity for staff to receive support before information is shared with students.
- Ensuring that students, particularly those who worked closely with the staff member, receive the news from a familiar and trusted adult.
- Arranging appropriate classroom or operational coverage to maintain stability and support affected staff.
- Providing opportunities for students and colleagues to express grief and access available supports.
- Consulting with the family regarding expressions of sympathy, funeral arrangements, and remembrance.
- Considering the ongoing impact on students, colleagues, and the school community, particularly during significant school events or milestones.



Death Within a Student's Family

The death of a parent, caregiver, sibling, or other significant person in a student's life may affect their emotional well-being, relationships, attendance and learning.

Considerations may include:

- Connecting with the student's family or caregiver to express sympathy and understand how the school can provide support.
- Respecting the family's wishes regarding what information, if any, may be shared with classmates or the broader school community.
- Preparing the student's teacher and other appropriate staff to respond with sensitivity and understanding.
- Providing a trusted adult or designated support person whom the student can approach when needed.
- Maintaining communication with the family and recognizing that grief may continue to affect the student over time.

Death Within a Staff Member's Family

When a staff member experiences the death of a loved one, a compassionate and respectful response can help them feel supported by their colleagues and school community.

Considerations may include:

- Expressing sympathy and respecting the staff member's wishes regarding privacy and communication.
- Offering appropriate support and flexibility in consultation with the staff member and relevant Board personnel.
- Coordinating expressions of sympathy or remembrance where appropriate.
- Supporting the staff member's return to work with sensitivity to their individual circumstances.
- Recognizing that grief is personal and may continue long after the individual returns to their regular responsibilities.

A Gentle Reminder

There is no single or expected way to grieve. Some individuals may wish to talk, pray, or participate in remembrance activities, while others may prefer privacy and familiar routines. Our role is to offer compassionate support without imposing expectations on how grief should be expressed.

Supporting Students and Staff

Grief is a deeply personal experience. Students and staff may respond to tragedy and loss in different ways, and their needs may change over time. A compassionate school and work environment provides opportunities for connection, understanding, and support without placing expectations on how individuals should feel or respond.

Understanding Grief

Grief may be expressed through sadness, anger, confusion, withdrawal, changes in behaviour, or difficulty concentrating. Some individuals may show little outward emotion, while others may need additional reassurance or support.

Children and adolescents may experience grief differently depending on their age, development, relationships, and personal circumstances.

Educators can help by:

- Acknowledging feelings without judgement or pressure to share.
- Maintaining familiar routines and a sense of stability.
- Providing opportunities for quiet reflection, conversation, or appropriate activities.
- Recognizing when a student may benefit from additional support.
- Remaining attentive to changes in behaviour, engagement, or well-being over time.

Creating a Supportive Classroom

Following a tragic event, students often look to familiar adults for reassurance and guidance. Educators are encouraged to:

- Share clear, age-appropriate information that has been approved for communication.
- Allow students to ask questions, while acknowledging that not every question has an answer.
- Listen with patience and compassion.
- Provide choices about participation in discussions, prayer, or remembrance activities.
- Maintain regular classroom activities where possible, with flexibility for those who need additional time or support.
- Seek assistance from school administrators or appropriate support profesisonals when concerns arise.

Students should never feel pressured to discuss their grief or participate in activities that make them uncomfortable.

Caring for Staff

Educators and school staff may also experience grief, distress, or uncertainty following a tragic event.

Staff are encouraged to recognize their own needs, seek support from colleagues or appropriate professionals, and access Board or community resources when needed.

Supporting others does not mean having all the answers.
Often, our presence, patience, and willingness to listen
are among the most meaningful forms of care.

Helpful Words and Actions

When someone is grieving, it an be difficult to know what to say or do. Simple, sincere expressions of compassion are often more helpful than attempts to explain the loss or make someone feel better.

What Helps

- **Acknowledge the loss.** Offer simple words of sympathy and care.
- **Listen without judgement.** Allow individuals to share as much or as little as they wish.
- **Use clear and sensitive language.** Speak honestly and appropriately about death and loss.
- **Respect individual responses.** Recognize that everyone experiences grief differently.
- **Offer practical support.** Ask what might be helpful rather than making assumptions.
- **Remain present.** Continue offering kindness and understanding beyond the immediate event.

What to Avoid

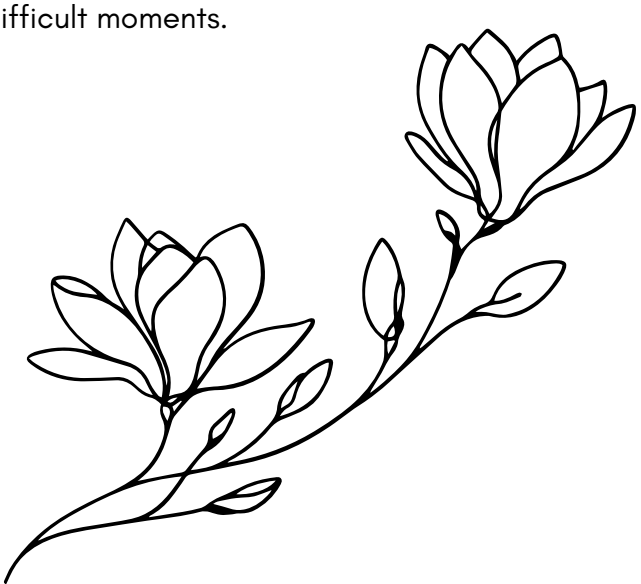
- Pressuring someone to talk, pray, or participate in remembrance activities.
- Making assumptions about how someone should feel or how long grief should last.
- Using expressions such as “I know how you feel”, “Everything happens for a reason”.
- Sharing unverified information or personal details without permission.
- Minimizing the loss or suggesting that someone should move on.
- Feeling responsible for providing all the answers or managing the situation alone.

Simple Words That Can Make a Difference

- I’m so sorry.
- I’m here if you would like to talk.
- It’s okay to feel however you are feeling.
- You don’t have to talk about it right now.
- I don’t have all the answers, but I am here to listen.
- Is there something that would help you today?

A Gentle Reminder

Compassion is not measured by finding the perfect words. It is reflected in how we listen, how we care, and how we accompany one another through difficult moments.



Communicating with Compassion

Clear, timely, and compassionate communication helps maintain trust and provides reassurance during difficult circumstances. Information should be shared thoughtfully, respecting the privacy and wishes of those affected while ensuring that students, staff, and families receive the information and support they need.

Guiding Considerations
Before communicating information about a tragic event, school administrators should consider:

Confirm the Information
Ensure that information is accurate and verified. Avoid sharing rumours, speculation, or unnecessary details about the circumstances of an event.

Respect Privacy and Family Wishes
Consult with the affected family, where appropriate, regarding what information may be shared. Respect personal circumstances, cultural traditions, and individual preferences.

Identify Who Needs to Know
Determine whether communication is required with individual students, particular classrooms, staff members, families, or the broader school community. Not every situation requires school-wide communication.

Choose the Appropriate Approach
Sensitive information is often best shared personally by a familiar and trusted adult. Consider the age and needs of students, the relationships involved, and the potential impact of the information.

Coordinate the Message
Consult with the Superintendent of Education to determine the content, timing, and method of communication. Ensure that staff who may receive questions are appropriately informed and supported.

Provide Reassurance and Support
Use clear, compassionate language. Acknowledge the impact of the event, identify available supports, and communicate any relevant next steps without creating unnecessary concern.

Additional Considerations

- Where possible, inform directly affected staff before communicating with students or families.
- Avoid announcing a death to students through email, social media, or a general school announcement when a more personal approach is appropriate.
- Use direct, age-appropriate language when discussing death.
- Ensure that communications respect the family's wishes.
- Refer media inquiries to the appropriate Board spokesperson in accordance with Board policy.
- Recognize that additional communication may be required as circumstances evolve.

Sample Communications

The following examples may be adapted in consultation with the Superintendent of Education. All communications should reflect verified information, respect the wishes of those affected, and consider the needs of the intended audience.

Message to Families – Death of a Student or Staff Member

Dear Families,
It is with deep sadness that we share the news of the passing of [name/description, as appropriate], a valued member of our school community.

We recognize that this news may be difficult for students, staff, and families, particularly those who knew [name] well. Our thoughts and prayers are with [name]'s family, friends, and all those affected by this loss.

Our school team is working together to provide care and support to students and staff. We encourage families to speak with their children, listen to their questions and feelings, and contact the school if additional support may be helpful.

During this difficult time, we are reminded of the importance of kindness, compassion, and caring for one another.

Thank you for your continued support of our school community.

Sharing Difficult News with Students

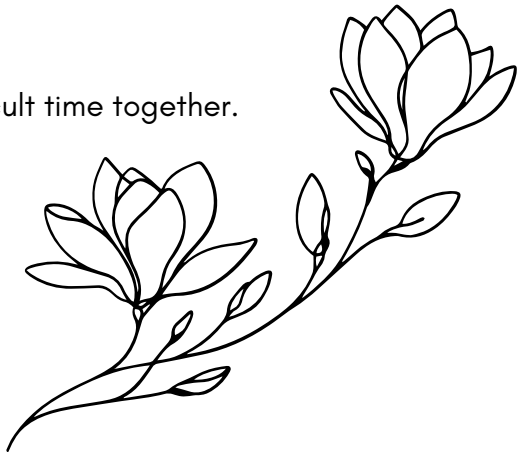
The following is a suggested approach for a teacher or trusted adult speaking with students in a classroom or small-group setting.

I have some sad news to share with you today.
[Name], who was part of our school community, has died.

This may be difficult news to hear. Some of you may feel sad, confused, upset, or have questions. Others may not know how they feel right now. All of these responses are okay.

We are here to support one another. You can talk with me or another trusted adult if you need to, and you do not have to share your feelings if you would rather not.

We will continue to care for one another as we work through this difficult time together.



Message to Staff – Death Within the School Community
Subject: Supporting Our School Community

Dear Colleagues,
I am writing to share some difficult news regarding [brief description of the loss, as appropriate].

We recognize that this news may affect members of our school community in different ways. As we respond, our priority is to support those who are grieving with compassion, sensitivity, and respect.

We will coordinate any necessary communication with students and families and ensure that appropriate supports are available. Additional information will be shared as needed.

Please be mindful of the privacy of those affected and avoid sharing information that has not been confirmed or authorized for communication.

Thank you for the care and understanding you continue to demonstrate toward our students, families, and one another.

These examples are intended as adaptable resources rather than prescribed communications.
The circumstances of each event should guide the nature and extent of the response.

Sensitive Circumstances
Where a tragic event involves particularly sensitive circumstances, including suspected suicide, violence, or an ongoing investigation, communications must be developed in consultation with the Superintendent of Education and appropriate professional supports.

Before You Share a Message
Even when using a sample communication, take a moment to consider:

- Is the information confirmed? Share only what is known and appropriate.
- Have privacy and family wishes been respected? Consider what information the family has agreed may be shared.
- Is the audience appropriate? Not everyone needs to receive the same information.
- Is the message compassionate and clear? Use simple language without speculation or unnecessary details.
- Are supports in place? Ensure students, staff, and families know where to turn for assistance.
- Has the communication been coordinated? Consult with the Superintendent of Education before sharing.

A Gentle Reminder

Communication is not simply about sharing information.
It is an opportunity to demonstrate compassion, provide reassurance,
and strengthen the sense of care and belonging within our school community.

Prayer and Remembrance

In times of tragedy and loss, prayer and remembrance can offer comfort, strengthen our sense of community, and remind us that we are not alone.

As a Catholic school community, we draw upon our faith to find hope and meaning during difficult moments. We also recognize that grief is deeply personal and that individuals may find comfort in different ways.

Opportunities for prayer and remembrance should be thoughtful, age-appropriate, and respectful of the wishes of those affected.

These prayers may be shared during moments of loss, quiet reflection, or when gathering as a school community. They offer simple words of comfort, faith, and hope when words of our own may be difficult to find.

A Prayer for Comfort and Peace

Loving God,
In moments of sadness and loss,
surround us with Your peace.
Comfort those who are grieving,
strengthen those who are struggling,
and help us care for one another
with kindness and compassion.
May we find hope in Your love
and comfort in the presence of those around us.
Amen.

A Prayer for Those We Remember

Loving God,
Today, we remember with love
those who are no longer with us.

We give thanks for the gift of their lives,
for the memories we hold close,
and for the ways they touched our hearts.

Comfort those who miss them,
bring peace to those who grieve,
and help us carry their kindness
into the world around us.

May we find strength in Your presence,
hope in Your promises,
and comfort in the love we share.
Amen.

A Prayer for Our School Community

God of love and compassion,
Be with our school community
as we walk through this difficult time.
Help us to listen with understanding,
speak with kindness,
and offer comfort to those who need it.
May our faith give us strength,
our friendships bring us peace,
and our care for one another remind us
that we belong.
Amen.



Simple Opportunities for Remembrance

Meaningful remembrance does not need to be elaborate.
Small, thoughtful gestures can provide opportunities for reflection, connection, and healing.

A Moment of Quiet Reflection
Provide a brief opportunity for silence, prayer, or personal reflection. Students and staff may choose to remember someone special, reflect on a meaningful memory, or simply sit quietly.

A Message of Kindness
Invite students or staff to write a message of sympathy, gratitude, or encouragement. Messages may be shared with the affected family when appropriate and with their agreement.

An Act of Compassion
Encourage students and staff to honour someone's memory through an act of kindness, service, or care for others. This might include helping someone in need, showing appreciation, or contributing to a meaningful school or community initiative.

Remembering with Care

Before organizing a memorial, prayer service, or other remembrance activity, school administrators should consult with the affected family and the Superintendent of Education.

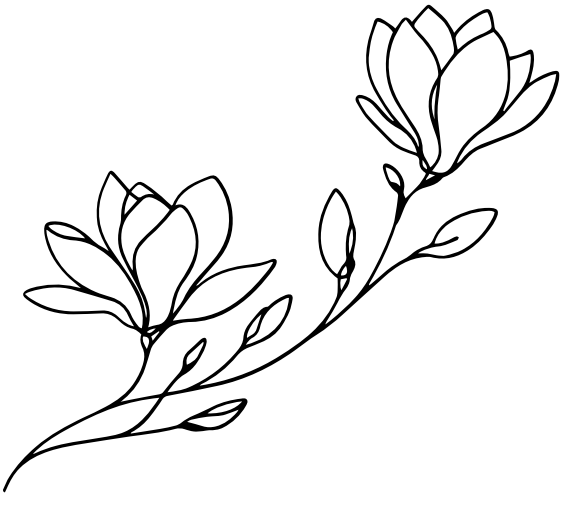
Consider the age and needs of students, the circumstances of the loss, cultural and religious traditions, and the potential impact of the activity on those who are grieving.

Participation should be sensitive to individual needs, and remembrance activities should never place pressure on anyone to express grief publicly.

A Gentle Reminder

We do not need grand gestures to demonstrate
our love and compassion.

Sometimes, the simplest acts of kindness,
a quiet prayer, or a moment of shared remembrance
offer the greatest comfort.





Continuing Our Care

The impact of a tragic event may extend well beyond the immediate response. As a school community, our care for students, staff, and families continues through the days, weeks, and months that follow.

When School Is Not in Session

Tragic events may occur during evenings, weekends, holidays, or school closures.
When this happens, school administrators should consult with the Superintendent of Education to determine whether communication, support, or other arrangements are needed before students and staff return.

Consideration should be given to those most directly affected and to any additional supports that may be required when school resumes.

When Additional Support Is Needed

Some circumstances may require specialized assistance beyond the supports ordinarily available within a school.

School administrators should work with the Superintendent of Education and appropriate professionals when:

- Students or staff demonstrate significant or ongoing distress.
- There are concerns about an individual's immediate safety or well-being.
- The event involves particularly sensitive circumstances, including suspected suicide, violence, or serious trauma.
- Additional mental-health, community, or emergency supports may be necessary.

Any immediate safety concerns must be addressed through established emergency and Board response procedures.

Accessing Support and Resources

School administrators and staff are encouraged to access available supports, including:

- Board Pastoral Care, student mental-health and well-being personnel.
- Appropriate school and system support staff.
- Employee assistance resources.
- Community mental-health, grief, and bereavement services.
- Relevant Board policies, administrative procedures, and emergency response protocols.

The Superintendent of Education can assist in coordinating additional supports and identifying appropriate resources.

Rooted in Belonging. Growing Together.

In moments of sorrow and uncertainty,
we are reminded that belonging
is more than being part of a community.
It is knowing that we are cared for, supported,
and never expected to face life's most difficult moments alone.

May our words bring comfort, our actions reflect compassion,
and our presence remind others that they belong.

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