

# CRITICAL INCIDENT POLICY

## **Introduction**

This plan has been developed to enable Coláiste Muire cope more effectively during and after a critical incident. Having a plan enables staff to react quickly and effectively and to maintain a sense of control. It will also ensure that normality returns as soon as possible and the effects on the staff and students are limited.

## **Definition of a Critical Incident**

A critical incident is an incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school and disrupts the running of the school. It is important for the school to identify the nature of the critical incident and which procedures to follow in each instance.

This policy is to be followed in the following circumstances:

- The death of a member of the school community through sudden death, accident, terminal illness or suicide
- The disappearance of a member of the school community
- An accident/tragedy in the wider community

**Notes: Extent to which the policy is rolled out – The nature of the incident will determine the procedures to be followed.**

**Use of the term “suicide” - The term ‘suicide’ should not be used without the consent of the family or until it has been established categorically that the person’s death was as a result of suicide. Instead the terms “tragic death” or “sudden death” should be used.**

## **Critical Incident Team**

1. Management – Principal/Deputy Principal
2. Guidance Counsellors
3. Year Head(s)
4. Chaplain/Religious Education Coordinator
5. Relevant Teacher(s), this may include a teacher with local knowledge.

## **Roles of each member of the Critical Incident Team**

### **1. Management.**

The role of the Principal and Deputy Principal is to be a supportive presence to others in the school. This is shown through acknowledging the feelings of those in any way effected providing informal/formal opportunities for people to chat and discuss the incident and its impact on them.

In times of crisis there may sometimes be media that will need to be sensitively managed so that the involvement becomes part of the support effort rather than an unhelpful intrusion. The Principal and Deputy Principal will take on this communication role **and will be the only points of contact with the media.** They will be responsible for preparing and updating press releases and statements to the school community. Also, they will have a major responsibility to support the other members of the crisis response team involved in communicating with staff, parents and students.

The link and involvement with the bereaved family is essential. The Principal should make initial contact with the bereaved family or other families who may be distressed. The Principal may want to assign a designated member of staff to maintain open lines of communication with the family or families.

### **2. Guidance Counsellors**

The school Guidance Counsellors will have responsibility to manage the range of counselling services required during times of trauma. Integral to the role of the counsellor is the role that is built up with the students particularly in the area of social and personal development. They have a role in supporting those students at risk and are also best placed to be a resource to staff and parents in a variety of ways.

### **3. Staff Members/Chaplain/Religious Education Department**

This team has a core pastoral role to play in supporting the family, students and staff.

Teacher(s) with local knowledge may be involved to assist with identifying students who are related to of friends of the student(s) affected. The Year Head has a role in identifying vulnerable students in their year group.

# School Critical Incident Plan

## Day One

1. The Principal/Deputy Principal must **confirm that the incident has occurred**.
  - i. Express sympathy to the family and assure them of school's support..
  - ii Get accurate information, bearing in mind that a written statement for staff will be prepared based on the facts – this may involve contacting the family, the Gardaí, Emergency/Medical Services, etc
  - iii. Ensure the family knows the identity of the school contact person (who could be the P/DP/YH/Designated staff member).
2. **Organise the Critical Incident Team to meet in the Meeting Room.** Its immediate tasks are:
  - i. To arrange cover for teaching members of the Critical Incident Team. Arrange room changes for the library. (Deputy Principal). Classes to continue as normal as possible.
  - ii. To prepare a short written announcement for subject teachers to read to classes. It should be factual and sensitive. The statement should highlight the support will be available to students in respect of the incident – both in the immediate and longer term.
  - iii. This is photocopied by the office. One copy for each member of staff plus spares.
  - iv. To locate the “Guidelines for Subject Teachers” handout (in Meeting Room locker). Hand to the office for pairing with the short written announcement. Ask for completed bundles to be handed back to the Critical Incident Team as soon as possible.
  - v. To identify vulnerable students, likely to be affected by the incident.
  - vi. To let the secretaries know what response to make to phone enquiries.
  - vii. To inform NEPS that assistance is required.
3. Distribute to subject teachers the short written statement paired with the “Guidelines for Subject Teachers” handout. The normal school timetable remains in operation. Then, ideally over the space of a single period:
  - i. Remove vulnerable students from classes and take to the library where they can be informed by Guidance Counsellors. **They must be informed first.** They must not be left alone.

- ii. **The student's class/year group should to be told next by subject teachers.** It is better to inform students in their class groups rather than in whole year groups. Students should remain in their rooms. They should not be left unsupervised.
  - iii. **The remainder of the student body can then be informed.** Again, students should remain in their rooms for the short term. They should not be left unsupervised.
4. Notify the Chairperson of the Board of Management. Notify the Board of management.
  5. The Religious Education Coordinator may assist the Guidance Counsellors in the library with vulnerable students coming to terms with the news. They may consider arranging a prayer service later in the school day. A set 'Reflective Room' may be set up e.g. for students to gather for short periods of time.
  6. Text parents and staff with a brief update of the facts.
  7. Prepare a media statement if needed. (Simple, factual and brief). Discourage any student or staff from dealing with the media. Only the Principal, Deputy Principal should liaise with the press.

### **Day Two until the Funeral**

1. Maintain contact with the family on school involvement in funeral. The Principal/Deputy Principal should, if possible, visit the home of the family affected. Make decisions on who should attend the funeral. Guard of Honour? Should the school be closed on the day of the funeral? Notify parents of closure.
2. Convene a meeting of the Critical Incident Team to review the events of the first 24 hours.
3. Arrange further support for students and staff (following NEPS and Guidance Dept. recommendations)
4. Update the staff, students and parents.
5. Staff can be updated at break(s). Should an outside professional attend?
6. Set aside time for the R.Ed. Department to plan student involvement in the funeral.
7. Open a Book of Condolence

### **Long Term**

1. Monitor students and staff for ongoing stress/grief. Note that shock and grief can present much later, suddenly, possibly as a result of a trigger.
2. Assess if long term counselling required.
3. Plan for anniversaries.
4. Evaluate the school's response.
5. Plan for the return of bereaved students.

# Guidelines for Subject Teachers

## Breaking the News

- If at all possible, all students in the building should be told during the same period. Groups should be no larger than normal class size. Vulnerable students are being informed in the Library.
- **Tell the class you have sad news and that it is difficult for you to do this.**
- **Let them know the name of the person the news is about.**
- **Read the photocopied statement prepared by the Critical Incident Team.**
- Clear unambiguous information (the facts as they are known) will reduce the spread of rumour. **Remind students to leave their phones off and not to use social media networks.**
- Expect shock, tears and possible outbursts from some groups. It is important to say that this is a normal reaction to hearing upsetting news. Some students may experience confusion, others may withdraw into silence.
- Not every class will react the same way. Some students may not even know the deceased, but it is important to acknowledge the loss for the whole school community.
- Explain that every student is being informed. Do not allow a student to leave the classroom alone in a distressed state. If they wish to go to the toilet, ensure that they are accompanied by a friend.
- Details of the critical incident will need to be communicated in a sensitive manner. Subject teachers should note if there are any students in the group who are 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 may find it difficult to cope with the sad news and that support will be provided through the Chaplain, Guidance Counsellors and other support services, possibly including the National Psychological Services (NEPS).
- Allow the students some time to mingle in the classroom.
- 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 person’s death was as a result of suicide. **The terms “tragic death” or “sudden death” should be used if consent not given, or suicide not established.**

Even then, it is important to respect the privacy and sensitivity of the deceased's family and friends. The phrase "**took his/her own life**" should be used if the family gave their consent. A short prayer for the deceased would be appropriate (see teacher and student journal)

- Encourage students to stay in school to support their friends.

# Guidelines for Liaising with the Press

It is important that the school plans 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 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.
- Give some thought, in advance, to the kinds of question that the media are likely to ask. Where possible and practical, seek advice from someone who has experience in dealing with the media prior to talking to the media.
- Agree a specific time and place for media briefings – either on a once-off or on-going basis.
- A Press Statement should be brief and simple. 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. 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.
- Staff and students will be advised that the provision of photographs to the media is the sole decision of the bereaved/affected family.

# Dealing with the Aftermath of a Suicide or Suspected Suicide

When a person dies through suicide, those who know the person experience a deep sense of shock. The unexpectedness of the death and the taboo associated with suicide can leave a school community unsure of how to proceed. The key to dealing with this is planning. **The term “suicide” should not be used until it has been established categorically that the student’s or teacher’s death was as a result of suicide. The term “tragic death” or “sudden death” may be used instead. Some vulnerable students may come under particular distress and may be at a higher risk of harming themselves following a suicide.**

## Staff

- Seek advice from NEPS re suicide and disseminate such advice to staff as soon as is practicable.
- Remind staff of the school’s critical incident plan and procedures.
- Ensure that a quiet place can be made available for staff and students.
- Management should consult staff regularly during the day to update information, to offer support and to further identify high-risk students.

## Students

- Advise the students of the support that is available to them from both the school and outside agencies.
- Take any talk of suicide seriously and provide support or refer on immediately.
- Students may wish to confide in and seek support from each other rather than adults. Facilitate this if appropriate and if it is possible. However, information should be provided about how to get further help if they or their friends should need it.
- High Risk students should be identified by the Critical Incident Team within a short period of time following a suicide. Indicators of High Risk students may include:
  1. Close friends and relatives of the deceased
  2. Students with a history of suicide/self harm
  3. Pupils who experience a recent loss, death of a friend or relative, family divorce or separation, break-up with a partner
  4. Students who have been bereaved by suicide in the past
  5. Students with a psychiatric history
  6. Students with a history of substance abuse

7. Students with a history of sexual abuse
8. Non-communicative students who have difficulty talking about their feelings
9. Students experiencing serious family difficulties, including serious mental or physical illness
10. Less able students

The school should be vigilant around the time of the inquest and the anniversary of the student's death.

# EMERGENCY CONTACT NUMBERS

## Emergency Services – 999 or 112

### DOCTORS:

Dr. P. McDonald 4811654, School Dr.  
Dr: D. Pender 4813636  
Dr. G. FitzGerald 4812508  
Dr: H. Kelleher 4813500  
Dr. P. Morehan 4814256  
Great Island General Practice 4814560

### HOSPITALS

Cobh Hospital 4811345  
Cork University Hospital 4546400  
Mercy Hospital Cork 4271971

### FIRE:

Ph: 999 or 112

### GARDAI:

Cobh 4908530

### GAS:

Cobh Plumbing Ph: 4855900  
Calor Gas Ph: 1850 812 450

### WATER:

Cobh Plumbing Ph: 4855900  
Cobh Town Council 4811307

### ELECTRICITY:

Stafford Electrical Ph: 0872589260  
ESB Ph: 1850372999

### NATIONAL POISONS INFORMATION CENTRE:

Beaumont Hospital, Dublin 9  
Phone: 01 809 2166.

Tusla (Social Services) – North Lee 4927000

NEPS – National Educational Psychological Services 0761 108450

Chaplain – Fr. John McCarthy 4813222

Chair of the Board of Management – Mr. Paul Scanlan 01 2303665

## APPENDIX A

### **Letter to Parents 1 (Sample letter in the event of a sudden death/accident) - *Responding to Critical Incidents: Resource Material for Schools, NEPS Publication 2008***

Dear Parents,

Coláiste Muire has experienced (*the sudden death, accidental injury*) of one of our students. We are deeply saddened by the death/events.

(*Brief details of the incident and in the event of a death, perhaps some positive remembrances of the person lost*)

We have support structures in place to help your daughter cope with this tragedy. (*Elaborate*) It is possible that your daughter may have some feelings that she may like to discuss with you. It is important to give factual information that is appropriate to her age.

You can help your daughter by taking time to listen and by encouraging her to express her feelings. All children are different and will express their feelings in different ways. It is not uncommon for children to have difficulty concentrating or to be fearful, anxious, or irritable. They may become withdrawn, cry, complain of physical aches and pains, have difficulty sleeping or have nightmares. Some may not want to eat. These are generally short term reactions. Over the course of the days to come, please keep an eye on your daughter and allow her to express her feelings without criticism.

(Optional) An information night for parents is planned for (date, time, place). At that time, further information about how to help children in grief will be given

Although classes will continue as usual, I anticipate that the next few days will be difficult for everyone. We have enclosed some additional information that may be useful at this time.

If you would like advice or assistance you may contact the following people at the school. (*Details*)

Yours sincerely,

## APPENDIX B

### Letter to Parent 2

**(Sample letter in the event of a violent death) - *Responding to Critical Incidents: Resource Material for Schools, NEPS Publication 2008***

Dear Parents,

I need to inform you about a very sad event that has happened.

(Give accurate information about the incident, but avoid using the word murder as this will not be established until the court case is completed).

*A child/young person from the neighbourhood, who is the brother of (name), a student here at school was killed as a result of (a violent attack, violent incident in the street etc.) earlier this week. We are all profoundly saddened by his death.*

We have shared this information and have had discussions with all our students so that they know what has happened. School staff members have been available for students on an on-going basis today. Our support personnel (incl. psychologists etc.) are available to advise staff and where necessary, to talk to students. This support will continue to be available for (if appropriate insert how long).

The death of a young person is tragic, but violent death is even more difficult. It is hard to have to teach our children about the violence in our world and to accept that sometimes we do not have the power to prevent it.

This death may cause a variety of reactions in your child. Some young people may be afraid for their own life and for the lives of those they love. Take time to listen to their fears and reassure them that what has happened is rare.

We have enclosed some additional information that may be useful during this time.

The media are in the vicinity of the school and may approach you or your child. You need not respond to their questions if you are approached. We will not allow the media to interview your child at school and our general advice is that you should not let your children be interviewed. They are not mature enough to judge what to say and may say something they will regret later.

(If planned) A support meeting for parents is planned for (date, time and place). At that time we can talk further about how to help ourselves and our children.

Our thoughts are with (family name) and with each of you.

Yours sincerely,

## APPENDIX C

### Letter to Parents 3

#### Sample Letter requesting consent for involvement of outside professional/s - *Responding to Critical Incidents: Resource Material for Schools, NEPS Publication 2008*

Dear Parents,

You may already know that our teachers and staff have been providing support to our students following (specific reference to the incident).

Additional support is also being provided to our school by psychologist/s from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

The psychologist will be available, where necessary to meet with individuals or with groups of students to help them during this difficult time.

The aims of such sessions will be to:

- a) Provide information about dealing with grief and loss in a healthy way
- b) Allow students the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings in a safe environment
- c) Allow students time to comfort and support each other, under guidance of experienced staff from .....
- d) Help students resume their normal routine as soon as possible.

If you would like your daughter to participate in such a session and any follow-up meetings that might be scheduled, please give your consent below.

You should return it to the school immediately. If you have any questions, please contact .....

Yours sincerely,

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I give my consent for my daughter \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in a Group/ Individual Session.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent or Legal Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX D

### **Sample Statement for the Media - *Responding to Critical Incidents: Resource Material for Schools, NEPS Publication 2008***

My name is (Name) and I am the Principal of Coláiste Muire. We learned this morning of the death of (one of our students or name the student). This is a terrible tragedy for \_\_\_\_\_ family(ies), our school and our community. We are deeply saddened by these events. Our sympathies and thoughts are with (Name) family and friends.

Name of student/students was a (year group of student) and will be greatly missed by all who knew her.

We have been in contact with (Name) parents and they have requested that we all understand their need for privacy at this difficult time.

Offers of support have been pouring in and are greatly appreciated. Our school has implemented our Critical Incident Plan.

Psychologists from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and (insert other information if relevant) have been with us all day supporting and advising teachers in their efforts to assist our students at this time.

The teachers have been helping students to deal with this tragic event.

The school has been open to parents, to support them and to offer them advice and guidance.

We would ask you to respect our privacy at this time

Thank you.

Ratified by the Chairperson, Board of Management

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Date 17.11.2015