

Board Policy on Recognition of Deceased Students at High School Graduation Ceremonies

Purpose

This policy establishes procedures for the recognition of deceased students at high school graduation ceremonies. The primary goal is to honor all deceased students in the same way while protecting the mental health and emotional well being of the school community, in alignment with evidence based postvention strategies (AFSP & SPRC, 2018).

General Guidelines for Recognizing Deceased Students

1. Family Consultation

The school will consult with the family of any deceased student to determine their wishes regarding recognition, offering compassionate support while informing them of applicable district policies and limitations (AFSP & SPRC, 2018).

2. Uniform and Neutral Recognition

If the family consents, deceased students may be recognized in a neutral and consistent manner that avoids conveying unintended messages that could influence vulnerable students, including:

- A general statement during the ceremony (e.g., “We take a moment to remember members of our graduating class who are no longer with us.”)
- Inclusion in the graduation program under an “In Memoriam” section with the names of all deceased students (without photographs, personal details, or causes of death)
- A general moment of silence for all deceased students, without naming individuals

“Avoid memorializing that singles out the student or highlights the cause of death, which could contribute to contagion.” (AFSP & SPRC, 2018)

3. Prohibited Forms of Recognition

To preserve the primary focus on the graduating class and reduce risk of emotional distress or suicide contagion, the following forms of recognition are prohibited for any deceased student:

- Public mention of individual names during the ceremony
- Display of empty chairs, caps, or gowns
- Speeches or dedications focused on individual students
- Recognition that references or implies the cause of death

“Highly visible memorials such as empty chairs... may unintentionally romanticize death.” (AFSP & SPRC, 2018)

Honorary Diplomas for Deceased Students

1. Eligibility

Students who were enrolled and in good standing at the time of their passing may be eligible for an honorary diploma, subject to administrative approval. “Good standing” is defined as:

- Active enrollment at the time of death
- Not under expulsion
- On track to graduate based on academic progress, attendance, and behavior expectations

In cases involving chronic illness, disability, or other extenuating circumstances, eligibility may be determined by the school principal in consultation with the student support team.

2. Issuance Process

Honorary diplomas may be offered to families under the following conditions:

- Presented **privately** to the family, not as part of the public ceremony
- No public announcement or listing in the graduation program
- No mention of cause of death

“Offer expressions of sympathy to the family in a private and respectful way.” (AFSP & SPRC, 2018)

Implementation and Annual Review

This policy will be reviewed annually by school administration, the counseling department, and district affiliated mental health professionals. Revisions will be made in alignment with:

- Best practices in suicide postvention
- The latest edition of *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools* (AFSP & SPRC)
- State and district policy updates

“Planning ahead and regularly updating procedures ensures a safer, more supportive response during a crisis.” (AFSP & SPRC, 2018)

References

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) & Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC). (2018). *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools (2nd ed.)*. Education Development Center (EDC). Available at: <https://afsp.org/after-a-suicide-a-toolkit-for-schools>

- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). (2018). Endorsement of *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*.
- National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). (2018). Endorsement of *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*.
- American School Counselor Association (ASCA). (2018). Endorsement of *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*.