WEST MIFFLIN AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

ADMINISTRATIVE GUIDELINES FOR STUDENT/STAFF DEATH PROCEDURE POLICY

ADOPTED: October 15, 2026

Related Board Policy: 819-Suicide Awareness, Prevention, and Response

Legal Reference: Pennsylvania Act 71 (Public School Code: 1526 Youth Suicide Awareness and Prevention)

Related District Procedures/Plans: District Comprehensive Safety Plan; Building Safety Plans; Emergency Preparedness and Student Reunification procedures (as maintained/updated by the WMASD).

1. **Purpose**

A. This Administrative Regulation establishes procedures for after the death of a current student that is active in the West Mifflin Area School District. A committee will guide the decisions related to procedures with the "Do No Harm" ethical principal in mind. This policy can also be utilized after a traumatic event within the school or community.

B. The regulation is intended to (a) support healthy grieving, (b) protect physical and emotional safety of the students and staff of the WMASD, (c) ensure consistency and equity no matter the matter the cause of death, and (d) reduce the risk of harm, retraumatization, or suicide contagion, consistent with Board Policy 819 and Act 71.

2. **Scope**

A. This regulation applies to all WMASD schools, programs, and school-sponsored activities.

B. This regulation governs school-related sponsored events that are reasonably connected to the school community and impact on the school environment in person and/or online.

3. **Definitions**

   A. Memorial (School-related): Any activity, display, recognition, gathering, publication, or online content intended to commemorate a deceased student or staff member or traumatic event affecting the school community.

   B. Temporary Memorial: A memorial that is time-limited (e.g., days/week) and removed or concluded by a defined date.

   C. Living/Renewable Memorial: A memorial that can recur (e.g., annual service activity) but requires review/approval for continuation.

   D. Permanent Memorial: A memorial intended to remain indefinitely (e.g., plaques, naming spaces).

E. Postvention: Organized activities after a death (particularly suicide) to support grieving, restore safety and routine, and minimize risk of contagion-central to effective school response.
F. Do No Harm: A core ethical principle requiring professionals to actively avoid inflicting physical, emotional, or psychological distress on students and staff.
G. Contagion: The process where exposure to suicide or suicidal behavior increases the risk that others will attempt or die by suicide. Vulnerable groups such as adolescents and young adults are generally the most susceptible to the effects of contagion. Using safe communication strategies, practicing responsible media reporting, and providing structured mental health support after a death can help prevent contagion.

4. Delegation of Responsibility/ Committee Establishment: School Bereavement Response Team

A. The Building Principal (or designee) shall serve as the School Bereavement Response Team Committee Chair and coordinate decisions in alignment with:
- Board Policy 819 postvention expectations
- Act 71 Suicide Awareness/Prevention Policy Requirements
- WMASD Emergency Preparedness and Building Safety Plans

B. The School Bereavement Response Team shall be convened by the principal/designee as needed, generally within one (1) school day of learning of a death or traumatic event impacting the school community, and sooner when spontaneous memorial activity arises.

5. The School Bereavement Response Team (Building Level)

A. The School Bereavement Response Team shall include, at minimum:
- Principal (Chair) or designee
- Assistant Principal/ Building Administrator
- School Counselor/ School Psychologist/ School Social Worker
- School Nurse
- Two (2) Teacher Representatives
- One (1) Student Representative who is a class officer from the most impacted grade (or, for staff death, from the building's student leadership body)
- Safety Liaison (School Police/ Safety Officer of designee), as needed for supervision/crowd planning
- Building administrative support/communications designee, as needed for messaging consistency

B. Student representatives serve in an advisory role and shall not be assigned tasks requiring access to confidential student records or sensitive personnel information.

6. Guiding Principles ("Do No Harm")

A. Do No Harm: Tributes must be physically safe and emotionally supportive.

B. Voluntary Participation: No students/staff are required to participate.
C. Consistency/ Equity: Decisions should be consistent to avoid perceived inequity no matter the cause of death.
D. Time-Limited by Default: Temporary tributes will last for one (1) week/ five school (5) days then taken down and given back to the students, or if communicated, the parents/guardians of the deceased will take them.
E. Safe Messaging: Temporary tributes shall not glorify, romanticize, or sensationalize death and shall prioritize life-affirming messages.
F. Special Considerations for Suicide: Tributes after suicide require enhanced safeguards to reduce contagion risk.

7. Alignment to WMASD Crisis/ Emergency Preparedness and Crisis Response

A. When a death or major crisis impacts a school community, the principal shall coordinate tribute actions with the building's crisis/ safety response processes contained in WMASD's district comprehensive safety plan and building plans and related emergency preparedness practices.
B. The principal shall coordinate with appropriate district personnel as required by the situation, including student services leadership and safety/security leadership roles reflected in district organization (e.g., Chief of School Police, Director of Pupil Services)
C. When gatherings or site management may affect safety on campus, the principal shall coordinate supervision and, when appropriate, consult the Chief of School Police, consistent with the WMASD safety operations.
D. If any tribute activity intersects with emergency operations (lockdown/evacuation/off-site reunification), actions must remain consistent with WMASD reunification and emergency preparedness guidance and communication expectations.

8. Postvention: Steps After a Death of a Student

A. Acknowledge and Validate: Before acting, the principal must verify the death and confirm the details with the family and/or local authorities. The School Bereavement Response Team will then debrief and respect the family's wishes. The team will keep the lines of communication open with them throughout the process. The team will consult with the deceased student's family to determine what details they consent to share. A structured notification will then be made informing the district staff, students, and parents. The notification needs to be clear, and written statements will be distributed in structured, small-group settings rather than mass assemblies. Communication is to be factual, compassionate, and consistent with safe messaging and privacy. Templates can be used.

B. Activate the team to begin communication with teachers, staff, administrators, and community stakeholders to manage next steps and appropriate postvention. Any questions, see the team.
C. Restore Safe Routines: Facilitate an orderly return to a normal structure within a few days to provide a stable environment for all student body. This will allow team to watch for signs of distress.
D. Provide Targeted Interventions: Offer individual counseling, small group counseling, academic accommodation, check-ins for heavily impacted students. SAP referrals can be made at this time.
E. FOR SUICIDE LOSS: Mitigate Contagion-use direct language, focus on the person and not the act. Monitor vulnerable peers which include close friends, family, and students who did not get along with the student, and/or partners

9. Tribute Types and General Rules

A. WMASD will recognize the death of a current student. Students from other districts or that have graduated will not be recognized.
B. Temporary tributes are allowed to be in place for five (5) consecutive school days. The School Bereavement Response Team will confirm the dates and share it with the students and staff once arrangements have been made. The tribute will only be safely displayed in the main office or guidance office of the school building. This allows for proper monitoring. Religious symbols, words, or phrases are not to be posted on the tribute by the team. Celebrate the life, personality, and positive contributions of the student or staff member. Tributes should be student-led. The School Bereavement Response Team will sit down with students to decide how they would like to remember the student that has died. Approval from the parents/guardians of the deceased student will then follow.
C. Equal Commemoration: Apply the exact same policies for all temporary tributes, fundraisers, graduation acknowledgements, and yearbook mentions. Include the students' portraits the same size as the rest of the student group. Religious symbols, hearts, or banners will not be allowed on or around the image. Get permission from the parents of the student before including the image of their child. Scholarships will not have the student's name included in the title of the scholarship. Graduation: The principal will have one (1) blue and one (1) gold chair to represent the students and staff that have died during that graduating class's tenure. The principal will ask for a moment of silence.
D. Avoid stigmatization for certain deaths including suicide and overdose.
E. Prosocial Action: Encourage positive contributions like charity fundraisers, community service projects, or donations to relevant educational programming. A fund (flower fund) can be set up by the Inter Club Council or building staff so that staff and students can make donations for the purchase of flowers or a gift for the

deceased student's or staff member's family. Records of all the money donated must be documented by the Inter Club Council or building principal. District money cannot be used to supplement the fund. The Inter Club Council or building staff will have permission to decide on one fundraiser to be held to benefit the deceased student or staff member. That money can be donated directly to the family by form of check or a suggested organization in honor of the deceased student or staff member.

F. Donations: Any donations made to the school in honor of a deceased student will be donated to the ICC and student activity fund.
G. It is recommended to begin a small grief group in the building. Refer to the Highmark Caring Place Grief Group Curriculum.

10. Improper Ways to Pay Tribute

A. Do not place permanent or living/renewable memorials or tributes on the WMASD campus: Avoid legacy markers like plaques, named buildings, or tree plantings.
B. Avoid closing school or using buses to transport students to funeral/viewing services.
C. Desks, lockers, seats or specific areas of a classroom will not house tributes.
D. Avoid whole-school memorial assemblies, flying flag at half-mast, or large permanent displays, lit candle memorials, public boards, etc.
E. Do not allow impromptu memorials that do not follow the above guidelines.
F. The WMASD is unable to lead the sale of items for the deceased student with images of the student or the student's name on the items as a fundraiser or tribute. Students are not permitted to add any items (including but not limited to pins, sleeves, bands, initials) to school-issued uniforms.
G. Students are not permitted to change school-issued uniforms worn for school events including but not limited to sporting events.
H. Staff will refrain from hosting private tributes or celebrations for the deceased student.
I. Off-site gatherings cannot be hosted by WMASD.

11. Recordkeeping and Review

A. The principal and School Bereavement Response Team shall retain all records of request forms, checklist, decisions, fundraiser receipts, and communication actions for each activation.
B. The superintendent shall review decisions for consistency and safety across all buildings.