

To Speak or Not To Speak? That is the Question!

Often when a death occurs, administrators are uncertain of what to have teachers say to students. When the cause of death is other than an accident or terminal illness, it often seems even more difficult to know whether to talk about it at all, or perhaps not bring it up to the students.

Often there are aspects of a death about which we are not free to comment because of an investigation, or perhaps issues that complicate whether we feel free to discuss the death with students. There are some compelling reasons not to buy into the knee-jerk reaction of "Don't say anything." Often what we really mean is "Don't say anything specific about the cause of death because that is a sticky issue." Here are several considerations as you work toward a decision about what to have teachers say and not say, or whether to say anything at all.

For starters, the more difficult the circumstances of the death, the more likely it is to spawn anxiety, curiosity, anger, gossip and rumors. We often think that if we don't bring it up, and if the kids don't bring it up, maybe it isn't an issue for them. Nothing is more likely to be further from the truth. In actuality, students read our non-verbal language just as well as our verbal messages, and are often respectful of the boundaries we set for ourselves. But that doesn't in any way mean that they aren't worried, that they aren't anxious, that they aren't spreading rumors, or that they aren't talking about it among themselves.

What we do when we refuse to discuss difficult issues with students is drive the conversation underground. Without our joining in the discussion, students only have one another for support, and their youth equates to very little wisdom. So what we do is leave them more vulnerable in so many ways, because we don't influence their conversation or contemplation with any wisdom or adult guidance or influence.

Another consideration is the opportunity we have at these difficult times in students' lives to do a range of very positive things:

- By being a part of the discussion, we can encourage students to be their most mature, "very best selves" in this time and help them see the deleterious effects of rumors.
 - "When things like this happen, we really may not have the facts right at first, even though information is flying around on texts and social media. So, while we're waiting for the official statement on this, we can really be contributing to some of the problems we see by guessing what happened and stating it as truth. Making up what we think might be true."
 - Reinforce that part of the reason for this is that, if we can KNOW what happened, we could try to stay safe from it, we can put it to rest in some way. Not knowing is the most difficult of all!
 - In the interim, while we wait for more official word, what we CAN talk about is what kind of impact this has on our school, on the community. Students can talk about what they wish adults understood about what is difficult about being a kid these days.
 - We can acknowledge that, in order to grieve or make sense of frightening events, it is helpful to talk, and while there may be aspects of this event that we cannot talk about, we certainly can look at what troubles the students, and help them brainstorm ways of coping.
- If the death was unintentional, but caused by another student, we have the opportunity to help students have empathy for how difficult this must be for, for instance, the driver of the car who survived his friend's death. This doesn't mean we promote acceptance of drunk driving, but rather that we make room for both the anger at a student having made a dangerous decision while also acknowledging that revenge toward that student continues the cycle of negativity.
 - State the obvious. This is about the facts. Who died. Who is reported to have been driving according to news sources. What is being investigated.



- If that information hasn't been reported by media, you can talk about the fact that it takes awhile for investigations sometimes. But acknowledge that via social media, students may have much more information than we have.
- Acknowledge that it is easy at times like this to think that you are hearing "the truth" when, in fact, details are often erroneous in early stages.
- If the death was gang related, we have a terrific opportunity to influence those students who might be on the verge of joining a gang to make a much more life-affirming decision. Often we're afraid to address the issue at all because we don't want to either support gang activity or even perhaps make a statement about gangs.
 - State the obvious. You can certainly announce the death; you can also confirm that news sources are saying it was a gunshot wound. At this point, unless media has released names of those accused, it is fine to just acknowledge that they may have lots more information through social media than the school has from officials at this point, and that it would be most helpful for them not to spread that information around until you have official word.
 - The next part is critical. "When things like this happen, we have a range of reactions, which can include sadness, fear, anger and a desire for revenge. All of these are common reactions, and the anger is acceptable, but you are still responsible for your reactions, and using violence or hurtful behaviors is not!"
 - The difficult questions students might ask ("Was it a gang thing?") can be answered by noting that parts of this – including cause of death, guilt or innocence of a suspect, etc., will be answered by others. That is the job of law enforcement and the courts.
 - The focus of the discussion then moves away from cause of death (which we may not know for sure initially) to examining how we cope and survive difficult times. This is the time to "bridge" the conversation to, "What is it like for us that these things happen?" and let students talk about their fears.

Something for us to remember is that the very first step in the tasks of grieving, according to Dr. Alan Wolfelt, is to "hear the truth." The reason that matters so much is that the circumstances of the death determine the quality of our grief. Grief feels different if the death was an act of nature or a terminal illness than if it was of human intent. Remembering this allows us to have more patience with students who are really blaming and perhaps creating rumors. Often this is what they do to try to gain a sense of control and begin to be able to grieve.

In nearly any death, the sketchier the details, the more students need a safe place to talk. One that allows adults to temper their thoughts with wisdom. Here are a few statements and questions that are fairly universal and work in a range of circumstances.

- "It is easy to want to blame someone else, but let's look at what happens if we're blaming the wrong person. Someone who didn't do this. What have we done to that person? Let's take a moment to listen to several of you talk about a time that others were saying something that wasn't true about you and what that was like."
- "What do you wish adults understood about the ways in which this is difficult for you all right now?"
- "Sometimes it helps if we can do something rather than just talk about it. If we were going to do one thing right now, what might that be?" (Students often collect money or do fundraisers for the family, or they might form a chapter of "Students Against Drunk Driving" or that sort of thing.)

The critical thing to remember is that, just because we don't talk about it doesn't mean the kids won't. And we need to remember; we teach them just as much by what we don't say as by what we do. In these times of increasingly complexities in our lives, students benefit from knowing that school staff wants to create a safe place. If we don't talk with students at times such as when they've lost a friend, how can we expect they'll come to tell us that they've heard someone is planning to shoot up the school? This is our opportunity to create an open and trusting climate.

