



## **Critical Response Policy for Sancta Maria College**

The Sancta Maria College policy on Critical Response is based on the values of compassion. In our tradition of Mercy, we recognise the importance of understanding for people in distress, the importance of comfort for those who are sorrowing and the need for care and support for all staff and students in the school community.

### **RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE POLICY**

The policy is based on the need for preparedness for a crisis that may arise for the school community. The policy aims to provide:

- Awareness of the implications for a crisis for individuals
- Guidelines for action that would meet the needs of many individuals in the school community

### **DEFINITION OF A CRISIS**

A crisis in the school is one that is likely to cause:

- Immediate or delayed emotional reactions in large numbers of staff, students and parents, surpassing their normal coping mechanisms, and/or
- Serious disruption to the normal functioning of the school, and/or
- Significant public/media attention on the school

Events that can constitute such a crisis include:

- The death of a student or member of staff
- Death or injuries on a school journey
- An act of violence
- Serious school fire/accident

Long-term preparation for a crisis may include:

- Establishment of a crisis response team in the school, comprising Principal, Deputy Principal, Guidance Counsellors and two Year Heads
- Designation of the Chairperson of the Board of Management as the designated person for the media
- Provision of reading material regarding the effects on individuals of shock, trauma and grief
- In-service opportunities in first-aid and counselling/listening skills
- Access to contact numbers of crisis response team and all staff members

## **GUIDELINES FOR IMMEDIATE RESPONSE IN THE EVENT OF CRISIS**

### **1. Inform Staff and Students**

- a. It is vital that all those needing information receive it as soon as is practicable. If the crisis originates outside school hours, the Crisis Response Team should be contacted immediately via a telephone tree and arrange for a meeting as soon as possible. It is helpful if a common statement is agreed when informing students and others. Such a statement will reduce the spread of rumour. Attempt to alert and inform staff in the first instance. If at all possible, the students should be told at the same time in no larger than normal, class-size groups.
- b. The statement should seek to:
  - i. Be communicated in a sensitive manner; validate feelings
  - ii. Give the facts as they are known – What happened? Who was involved?
  - iii. Highlight the support that will be available
  - iv. Indicate the actions that are planned

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 student's death was a result of suicide.

In the case where an accident has occurred on a school trip, a similar statement is needed to assist those who will be contacting relatives. It is preferable to have a group of people involved so that all concerned are informed in or around the same time.

#### **Some Further Considerations in Contacting Parents:**

- Offer any practical help needed – transport, phone numbers, contact names, etc.
- Enquire if the parent is alone or has someone to offer support
- Carefully review with the parent that the information given has been fully understood
- Alerting all other involved parents to the trauma will help them when they subsequently make contact with their child

#### **Liaising with the Press**

If there are to be enquiries from the press, it is important that the school caters for this possibility by nominating one person only to act as a liaison person. In preparing a press statement, thought should be given to the following suggestions:

- Priority to be given to the sensitivities and needs of those affected directly by the crisis
- Not releasing names, addresses and telephone numbers
- Rely on facts and avoid speculation
- Consider likely questions and a response to them
- Agree a time for briefings with the press – if this is necessary in an ongoing situation
- Nominate a specific location for press briefings

It is recommended that this press statement be simple and brief. It should express the sorrow of the entire school community at the sudden death of one of its members, and it

should extend sympathy to the bereaved family. This statement should be adhered to – and not elaborated on – in all communications with the media, and it should be communicated to every member of the school staff. Staff and students should be discouraged from dealing with the media.

### **Others to be Informed**

When possible, inform the Chairperson of the Board of Management and decide whether an emergency meeting of the Board is necessary.

Whether the school will remain open or will close as a mark of respect to the bereaved family, will depend on the judgement of the Principal and management following consultation with the school staff. If the decision is to close the school, it is advisable to do so *only* after informing the students of the student's death and of the routine which the school will follow over the coming days. Parents should be formally notified of **any** school closure.

Consider when, or if, it is appropriate to inform the school's insurance company and other concerned agencies.

## **2. Roles of Principal and Deputy Principal**

- Activate the Crisis Response Plan by calling together the Crisis Response Team
- Put together as much factual material as possible and inform staff of what has happened
- Make contact with the family of the deceased
- Be aware of any staff members who may be particularly distressed, e.g., staff who are recently bereaved
- Respect the fact that some staff, for whatever reason, may feel that they are unable to be involved in the school's direct response to the trauma
- Ensure that staff directly involved with the trauma receive support, are not overworked and have time to debrief
- Be available to staff and encourage them to express how they feel things are going
- Find out details of funeral, etc. and communicate to staff and students
- Visit the bereaved family

## **3. Roles of Crisis Response Team**

Actions of the Crisis Response Team may include:

- Preparing a statement for students and distributing guidelines for teachers on how to conduct classroom discussions for grieving students
- Developing a crisis plan for the day, i.e. a school routine for the first day; deciding on any arrangements that should be made on the first day
- Distributing key tasks
- Ensuring that all staff know the news – in this regard, noting any absences or late arrivals
- Outlining for staff the plan for the day and the support available
- Devising a process for dealing with phone enquiries from anxious parents

- Identifying particular students who may need to be told individually, e.g., close friends and relatives
- Deciding on the format for support for students
- Assigning care/support rooms
- Preparing the Oratory
- Identifying and setting up a suitable location for remembrance site/flowers for students/parents/staff/public
- Organising as much support as possible from within the school staff
- Contacting outside professionals such as NEPS (National Educational Psychological Service), professional counsellors and mental health professionals for support
- Reviewing events of the first day to make plans for the following day
- Planning procedures for school involvement in removal and funeral
- Involving parents in any school liturgy
- If the school is to be closed on the day of the funeral, preparing notification to parents and visitors
- On day two, referring students who are not coping to Guidance Counsellor/s on an individual basis as it is important for the school to run as normally as possible
- On day three, the team convening to plan response in the days after the funeral
- Nominating contact people for parents to liaise with regarding the progress of their children

#### **4. Roles of Staff Members**

In giving support to students, staff members should:

- Answer questions in a straightforward way
- Acknowledge if questions cannot be answered at the time
- Avoid speculation
- Sustain an atmosphere where it is okay to talk
- Know that the most important thing to do is validate their experiences and feelings
- Encourage students to talk
- Observe and listen; notice signs of distress
- Advise those not involved
- Note individual differences in adjustment
- Identify students who may have experienced other losses
- Not allow students to leave the classroom on their own if they are distressed
- Assign roles on monitoring the corridors and toilets
- Where students are distressed, gently guide them back to classroom or care room
- Following a trauma, air their feelings and reactions – if the need arises – through staff meetings, professional help, staff prayer services, etc.
- Take some quiet time for themselves to look after themselves
- At the end of the first day, have a staff debriefing session which should clarify what happened and allow for a sharing of reactions; consider strengths and weaknesses of the crisis plan; identify staff and students who need additional support; and adjust the plan for additional support where necessary

## **5. Medium- and Long-Term Action**

Students returning to school after a major accident or bereavement cannot easily be categorised in terms of their needs. Consideration could be given to having a special day of reflection/retreat or a Rainbows Programme session.

In the days and week after the tragedy, the Crisis Response Team should review the needs of students, parents and staff in relation to the trauma.

Over time, all staff will note student performance in academic work and involvement in extracurricular activity.

The Principal will constantly review specialist staff training and links with outside agencies in the areas of change, loss, death and crisis.

## **6. Review of the Policy**

The Crisis Response Team will review this policy soon after it is invoked at a time of crisis. This policy will be reviewed by staff members in May 2017.

## **7. Communication of the Plan**

- If there are students from different ethnic or religious backgrounds, some consultation with parents about their beliefs and rituals is advisable so that the school is aware of issues that may arise
- All staff should be made aware of plans/policies
- CIMP (Critical Incident Management Plan) should be instantly accessible to the personnel who will have the key roles
- All new/temporary staff should be informed
- Copy of plan to be given to each staff member
- Copy of layout of school building to be displayed in key places, with exits highlighted

## **8. Compiling Emergency Information for School Trips**

- List of all students/staff involved and teacher in charge
- List of mobile numbers of teachers in charge and of other staff
- Up-to-date medical information on students

## **9. Preparing Templates**

- Prepare templates for letters to parents and for press releases. These should be 'ready-to-go' and on the school's computer system so that they can be adapted quickly if an incident occurs.

## **10. Administration in case of an Incident**

- Identify dedicated telephone line
- Identify rooms

- Designate a point where a log of events and telephone calls made/received will be kept
- Log all offers of help – name of agency and what they are offering, etc.

#### **11. Medium Term**

- Develop a plan for monitoring students over the following few weeks, especially those identified as ‘vulnerable’.
- Evaluate school’s response to the incident and amend the CIMP if necessary – What went well? Where were the gaps? What was most/least useful?

The Policy was first adopted by the Board of Management in October 2007.

**It was reviewed during the 2013/2014 school year and the revised policy was adopted by the Board of Management on Tuesday, June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2014.**

Signed: John Shortt

(Chairperson of Board of Management)

Date: June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2014

Signed: Gerardine Kennedy

(Principal)

Date: June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2014