3615-7215 Memorials and Grief Support in Schools

The Wake County Board of Education is committed to supporting school communities during times of loss with sensitivity, equity, and respect. The Board recognizes that the death of a student or staff member has a profound impact on the school community. It is the policy of the Board to ensure that memorial activities honor those affected and are guided by established principles, while maintaining schools as welcoming, supportive spaces focused on learning and well-being.

This policy provides a guiding framework for decision-making regarding memorials that balances the needs of grieving individuals with the Board's educational responsibilities. This policy aims to ensure consistency and equity from case to case, recognizing that decisions made immediately after traumatic events may set difficult precedents if not carefully managed.

I. **Guiding Principles**
   - A. **Respect and Sensitivity:** Activities shall reflect sensitivity to the wishes of the grieving family and the developmental, cultural, and religious needs of the community.
   - B. **Equity:** All losses must be recognized with equal respect and dignity. Differentiating responses based on an individual's prominence may suggest that some losses are more significant than others.
   - C. **Learning Environment:** Memorials should not create lasting reminders that intensify the grieving process or detract from the educational mission.
   - D. **Safety:** Policies shall prioritize the emotional safety of students, particularly regarding the prevention of suicide contagion.

II. **Governance and Approval**
   - A. **Approval Authority:** All memorial activities in the school setting must be approved by the school principal or the Superintendent.
   - B. **Family Consent:** Before any communications or activities are undertaken, the school must designate a consistent point of contact to obtain the family's permission to share information and to ensure their wishes are respected.

III. **Immediate Response**
   - A. **Communication**
     1. School marquees will *not* be used to post messages about the deceased.
     2. Personal information should not be posted on school social media pages. Announcements should be handled privately and respectfully, avoiding school-wide assemblies for the initial announcement.
   - B. **Funerals and Services**
     1. Memorial services shall be held off school grounds to allow the community to gather respectfully without disrupting the learning environment.
     2. Funerals will not be held in District facilities.
     3. Students wishing to attend services may do so with parent permission and will be excused from class.

4. Students and staff will not livestream funerals or ceremonies on school campuses.

IV. Memorial Activities and Guidelines

A. Spontaneous Memorials

1. Impromptu memorial displays (i.e. informal, student-initiated tributes such as flowers, notes, t-shirts with the classmate's photograph, etc.) may be allowed but must be managed with clear boundaries.
2. School staff should communicate clearly about expectations and limitations, and plan for removal of the memorial and any items.
3. The display will remain for up to 5 days. This timeline must be communicated to the school community in advance to avoid misunderstandings.
4. The School Crisis Team will review items to ensure they are appropriate. After the display period, families will be offered the items as keepsakes.

B. Permanent Memorials

Rules and conditions for permanent memorials are found in Policy 9300 Naming Facilities.

1. ~~To avoid constant reminders of loss that hinder healing, permanent memorials (e.g., plaques, statues, trees) are prohibited on school grounds.~~
2. ~~The District does not permit memorials that require altering school property, naming schools or facilities after individuals, or mounting items to walls/trophy cases.~~

C. Death by Suicide

Every loss shall be commemorated equally; however, such activities following a death by suicide must be managed with sensitivity. They require a careful balance between honoring a person's life, supporting grieving survivors, and preventing the risk of suicide contagion or glamorizing the manner of death.

1. Following a death by suicide, schools must follow recommendations from the District Crisis Response Team to protect vulnerable individuals from additional emotional distress.
2. Staff should encourage students to seek support from Student Services staff if they have questions or concerns. Guidance should emphasize peer support, personal counseling, and promoting help-seeking resources like the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.
3. Permanent memorials (e.g., plaques, yearbook pages) are strongly discouraged following a student's death by suicide. Instead, memorials that are temporary, nonrenewable, or in the form of a living memorial are recommended (e.g. donations to suicide prevention programs). Such memorials honor the student's life while supporting healing.

D. Commencement Acknowledgement

1. Graduation focuses on scholastic achievement.
2. To honor deceased students and staff during the ceremony, the school may display either a floral arrangement or individual vase(s) with a white

rose and ribbon (to be given to the family after the ceremony). In either case, a statement explaining the memorial may be included in the graduation program.

3. An honorary diploma recognizing the former student can be delivered to parents after the ceremony upon request by the parents. Parents will not be allowed to participate in the ceremony by walking across the stage to accept the diploma on behalf of the student.
4. To avoid lingering reminders of loss, schools shall avoid leaving an empty chair or holding a moment of silence during the ceremony.

E. Fundraising and Gifts

1. ~~Public funds Schools shall not purchase or maintain memorials.~~ Schools should not organize fundraising efforts due to concerns about transparency and pressure on the community.
2. Additionally, schools should not endorse any fundraising efforts. Staff organization and/or participation in such efforts is to be conducted outside of school hours.
3. Families or community members wishing to honor or remember the deceased student or staff member may wish to consider the following options:
    a. Scholarships established in the name of the deceased.
    b. Donation to a charity or program that is dedicated to helping students.
    c. Donation to the family or a charity of its choice.
    d. Sympathy card and flowers at the funeral.

References:

- American Association of Suicidology
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
- National Association of School Psychology
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Association
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center