

Suggested Protocols for Commemorative Activities

In the hours, days and weeks following a death event it is quite common for students to want to develop plans for a commemorative activity and/or to permanently memorialize the life of a deceased person associated with their school. The following are some areas to be concerned with:

Memorial-related objects and commemorative activities

All initial memorial-related objects (i.e. wooden cross, flowers, balloons, streamers, banners, etc.) placed on school grounds should be carefully removed from school grounds and given to the family prior to the funeral. Any other unauthorized memorial objects placed on school grounds thereafter should be carefully removed and collected with the plan to offer it to the family. Other efforts by students or concerned parents to commemorate or memorialize the deceased at school, or during a school-sponsored event, whether through a school newspaper article, yearbook, awareness activity, etc. should be done under the supervision of (and possible censorship by) a designated staff member. If the selected commemorative activity or memorial object seems to have a certain relevancy to the deceased it may give students a greater a sense of meaning to the event. Those who have a sense of meaning can more easily develop a positive purpose, resolve or determination to do something constructive. Such group activities or projects may provide an opportunity for the involved staff member to participate in intermittent discussions of the loss event. This may also allow staff to track student adjustment and helps to ensure that such activities are appropriate. Permanently placed objects on school grounds memorializing the deceased should be approved by the principal and not become a distraction from the education of the student body nor should such objects be located in a prominent unavoidable area of the school building or grounds.

Contact with the family of the deceased

A specific staff member should be a liaison to the family and obtain information about funeral services, collect and return the student's belongings and academic works, and present anything produced by students to commemorate the death. The same staff member, in close collaboration with the school principal, should maintain ongoing communication with the family to address any other requests.

The student's locker and desk

Reassignment of the student's locker and desk to another student should occur at the start of a new semester or the beginning of the school year. In keeping with the goal of minimizing ongoing daily reminders of the death event and the resultant distraction from the educational process the student's locker and desk should not be made a depository of, nor have, any notes, pictures, drawings, etc. affixed to its exterior unless this has been approved by the principal.

Posters and other student expressions associated with the death event

Posters affixed to walls referring to the deceased or events associated with the deceased should be approved by the principal and given a removal date. Other expressions by students that are not affixed should be addressed within the constitutional context of free speech as it applies in schools. For clarification see: <https://ncac.org/resource/first-amendment-in-schools#firstamendpublicschools>

School yearbook

A standard picture of the student (similar to those shown in his/her class) should be used to acknowledge the death of that student in a section of the yearbook designated for all deceased students. A standard format depicting the student's accomplishments and school affiliations (if that is normally an option to all students in the senior class) should be used for the deceased student in order to establish consistency between all deceased students.