

THE Leader


**American Federation of
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 AFSA, AFL-CIO

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Closing the Gap Between Grieving Students and Unprepared Educators

How the Coalition to Support Grieving Students is Helping to Strengthen School Communities

Statistics show that nearly 40 percent of children will face a death of a peer, while 20 percent of students will witness a death, all by the time they complete high school. Additionally, 5 percent of U.S. children will lose a parent by the time they are 16 years old.

While studies show a loss in a child's life negatively impacts his or her academic performance and behavior, only 7 percent of teachers reported having had any amount of bereavement training. In a survey conducted by the New York Life Foundation with the AFT.

As leaders in school communities, principals play a key role in implementing resources, creating professional development opportunities and establishing procedures. Taking steps toward addressing the epidemic of grieving students on a national level, the American Federation of School Administrators has joined the Coalition to Support Grieving Students.

The first of its kind, the coalition represents a partnership of the 10 largest national education groups united in the belief that grieving students need

the support and care of the school community.

These groups include:

- American Association of School Administrators (AASA)
- American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA)
- American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
- American School Counselor Association (ASCA)
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
- National Association of School Nurses (NASN)
- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)
- National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
- National Education Association Health Information Network (NEA HIN)
- School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA)

Interview with David Schonfeld

David Schonfeld is a developmental-behavioral pediatrician and director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement in Philadelphia. He is one of the driving forces behind the coalition and serves as its leading expert on child grief and bereavement. AFSA sat down to talk with Dr. Schonfeld about his background, the coalition's mission and best practices for addressing student grief in a school community.

See page 4

Responding to Grief: Locals Share Their Personal Experiences of Working Through Student Crisis and Trauma

Every day, school leaders face the challenge of helping their students work through grief and trauma. Through a survey, AFSA asked several members representing different roles of leadership within their school communities to discuss their firsthand experiences with these challenges.

See page 7

Anthony Salvatore: Moving Forward After Sandy Hook Starts With a Better Understanding of Mental Health

On Dec. 14, 2012, 28 people in Newtown, Connecticut, including AFSA member and Principal Dawn Hochsprung, lost their lives in the tragic events at Sandy Hook Elementary and in town that stunned the world. AFSA spoke with Anthony Salvatore, Newtown Middle School assistant principal and president of the Connecticut Federation of School Administrators, who shared his experiences of trying to make sense of what had happened and work through his grief.

See page 11

continued on page 18

The Tragedy of Missed Opportunities



AFSA President Diann Woodard

My teaching career began during the rise of street gangs in Detroit. Most Mondays students would return from the weekend with stories of hearing constant gunshots at night, or telling of someone they knew who had been shot or killed. As a new teacher, I never commented much on what the students were talking about, because my biggest concern at the time was keeping control of the classroom.

I don't have any hard statistics, but when students were having difficult times after a violent weekend, they most often were sent out of class for insubordination, or for not having their homework done. And, of course, skipping classes increased.

Even when I lost a student from my class, there were no discussions with the class about his death. I remember the case of David. He was a great kid; mature beyond his years and well liked. He had gone missing for several days and was later found in a vacant lot, shot in the head. To this day we still don't know why. But he loved to write poetry. Poetry that I held on to and read and read and cried and mourned in the days following his death—never in front of the class, and always alone.

Instead, I met and held class each day, like every other. I attended the funeral and did a perfunctory greeting to the parents, but I never shared the more intimate details of their son's wish to be a writer. Nor did I share the poems he wrote for my class or the private poems he gave me to critique. All I knew to do as a young teacher was to

maintain control—control of the class and control of me.

Fast forward 20 years. I am the administrator in charge of discipline in the same city and the landscape has not changed. Now I am on the southwest side of the city, known as Mexicantown. Hispanic

practical, easy-to-understand materials that can help educators and others in the school identify how children grieve and what to look for. He shares with us poignant stories and situations that help us to identify what should be done to help students, educators and others. Dr. Schonfeld caused me to look inward

As administrators we cannot give our problems away. We need to be trained and have resources to help us make important decisions about what needs to be done.

gang activity is prevalent. Again, students return from most weekends and report the loss of someone.

The school district would send crisis teams to work with students. Crisis teams were great. They consisted of all kinds of support personnel: social workers, psychologists, counselors and the like. They came in and stayed for a while, but they didn't help teachers or others to develop the capacity to handle issues once they left.

As administrators we cannot give our problems away. We need to be trained and have resources to help us make important decisions about what needs to be done. Today, I am different after reading Dr. David J. Schonfeld's materials. It changed my earlier view that the best response to grief or pain was avoidance—returning to normal or control. Dr. Schonfeld has provided

and realize that what I had been doing really missed opportunities to provide support and guidance to children who were obviously hurting. Whereas I was busy trying to distance myself from the realities of the crisis each weekend, I have learned that the Monday morning disturbances were really cries from students who themselves didn't understand how to cope with what was happening in their community.

The need for training school administrators is urgent. Death is all around us, from aging parents, war and illness to street violence. Students look to us seeking ways to understand that world. We need to be prepared to help them. ■

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Placing Grief and Loss Materials in Your Educational Toolbox

Handling grief and loss at school is not the sole responsibility of those in the counseling office, the nurse's office or the district grief counselor. Handling the school community's response is the duty and responsibility of all caring adults within the school community, regardless of their role.

I know from my own experiences at the middle and high school level that when tragedy occurs, school administrators often are whom community members look to for answers and solutions. Additionally, if crisis strikes, administrators must be prepared, typically without a great deal of time to come up with a plan of action.

The materials developed by the Coalition to Support Grieving Students can assist you in helping your school community in time of grief and tragedy.

As the school leader(s), administrator(s) need to gather staff members together and help them construct a positive intervention plan. No one should be allowed to say, "I wasn't trained to handle this problem, have someone else handle the problem."

These materials do not provide answers to every concern or situation, but they provide solutions that can be adapted to different situations. I would urge each of you to take a few minutes to visit the links below and review these materials:

- www.grievingstudents.org
- www.schoolcrisiscenter.org

Like a good school safety plan, you never know when you will need to use them. ■

James Dierke, executive vice president of AFSA and a 41-year veteran public school teacher and administrator, represented AFSA as a founding member of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students, and brought to this group his diverse background in dealing with grief and loss at schools and how to effectively work with students, parents and staff to address the problems concerning individual and group loss within school communities.



Interview With David Schonfeld

David Schonfeld is a developmental-behavioral pediatrician and director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement in Philadelphia. He is one of the driving forces behind the coalition and serves as its leading expert on child grief and bereavement. AFSA sat down to talk with Dr. Schonfeld about his background, the coalition's mission and best practices for addressing student grief in a school community.



AFSA: You started in pediatrics. What drew you to child bereavement and grief?

Schonfeld: I was doing my fellowship in developmental-behavioral pediatrics, which deals with common developmental and behavioral concerns.

I volunteered to go and speak at a school that had several children whose parents died of natural and unrelated causes. From that point on, I just started being asked to go to a lot of schools where there had been deaths and then started a program back in 1991 while I was at Yale. I also did my research in young children's understanding of death and school-based interventions.

AFSA: The coalition discusses the epidemic of overlooked grieving children, especially in schools. Why is this the case?

Schonfeld: For some reason, in our society, we view bereavement as a normative event and therefore feel that it doesn't warrant any particular attention, or at least professional attention.

There are other experiences that children have that are also very upsetting and distressing to them and some of them get labeled with a diagnosis. You'll have post-traumatic reactions and get trauma treatment, but there aren't post-death reactions and bereavement treatment. So, a lot of it is more bereavement support. I always

find that interesting, because when you ask people about something bad that has happened, they often say, "well, it's not like anyone died." But then—if the gold standard of what's most tragic is when someone you care about does die—it's odd that after the death people just say that grief is a normal experience and they don't need any intervention. I've never really understood that, but I think that's part of the reason it's overlooked.

The other thing is that it makes people uncomfortable, and they really would prefer that children don't experience loss—and children pick up on that and they therefore don't talk about it because it makes adults uncomfortable when they do.

AFSA: How did the Coalition to Support Grieving Students come about and how did you get involved?

Schonfeld: When I started doing work with New York City schools after 9/11, I was coordinating the training for the school crisis teams in the New York City school system. While I was doing training for them, people came up and said, "Every teacher should go through this training." I said, "Well, how many teachers are we talking?" When you added in the paraprofessionals, it was about 120,000. So my comment at that point was, "Why don't they learn this before they go into a classroom?" I mean, we know children are going to experience loss, we know it impacts

their learning, their behavior and their development. Wouldn't it be better if teachers and other school personnel were familiar with this topic before they entered the classroom?

That's when I started the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement. And one of the primary aims of the center was to prepare classroom educators and other school personnel in how to support grieving students. Then I did a project with the American Federation of Teachers [AFT] with a survey that showed the primary reason why educators aren't addressing this issue is because they've had no training in it. And they're afraid they're going to make matters worse or don't know exactly what to do to help. So, they identified the primary barrier as being the lack of training, and we decided to try and address that.

I did trainings in a number of AFT chapters until they felt that their general membership was asking for it more broadly. Then we created a coalition with funding from The New York Life Foundation that involved the 10 major professional organizations representing school professionals.

What we're trying to emphasize in schools is not the expectation that most of the school personnel will be providing counseling or therapeutic services, but we want them to be supportive. And that's what the material is there for, to take people who interact with kids on a daily basis in school settings and help raise their comfort level and

skill level on how to have conversations and how to be empathic and how to support them through the experience.

AFSA: What impact does bereavement and grief have on children in schools?

Schonfeld: For many children, it has at least a temporary impact on their ability to learn effectively in a classroom setting. It's harder for them to concentrate, harder for them to learn new concepts, and harder for them to retain information. It has an impact on their overall well-being. They may have trouble sleeping, they may have trouble eating, they may feel less energetic.

It also has an impact on their behavior. Some children will behave in certain ways that get them in trouble. You might see increased risk taking, you may see more drinking in older kids. It may also lead to them being less tolerant, less flexible.

I think if school personnel don't understand this, they may react in a non-supportive way. I'm not saying kids should be allowed to be out of control, but our job, when someone is grieving, may be to help them become in control rather than punishing them for being out of control or doing something that's not desirable because they're grieving. I'm not suggesting that we say, "Well, you're allowed to shout if you've had a recent death in your family." But the issue is the way you would handle it and respond to it. It would be more, "I know this might be a very difficult time for you. Maybe we can go someplace else, because you can't raise your voice in class," as opposed to: "You're going to the principal's office for being upset."

AFSA: What do you think are some of the biggest misconceptions educators have when dealing with grieving students?

Schonfeld: One is that I'm going to say the wrong thing and make matters worse so it's better to just say nothing at all. But saying nothing at all says a

whole lot. It says that either you don't believe the child's been impacted, or that you don't think the child is able to talk about it or deal with it. Or that you're incapable of talking about it and dealing with it. Or that you don't care. All the things that it says are worse than the vast majority of anything you would say that would be intended to help the child.

Some people will also say, "Well I'm afraid that I'm going to upset the child by bringing it up." But when someone's acutely grieving, they're thinking about it almost continuously, and if they show they're upset, it's not because you asked the question. The question just allows them to show you how they're feeling.

For some reason, in our society, we view bereavement as a normative event and therefore feel that it doesn't warrant any particular attention, or at least professional attention.

Another misconception that you'll see in some communities, particularly for older children in communities marked by a great deal of violence and loss, is that these kids are somehow used to it and that it doesn't affect them. The reality is that they'll most likely have come to appreciate the fact that adults in the schools and probably elsewhere in their life are not going to be offering them support, or are not capable of providing support. So they don't seek it. And they may then turn to their peers, or they may engage in risk-taking behavior, because they are afraid of something happening to them. Sometimes kids join gangs because they're afraid they're going to get hurt if they're not in a gang, or they may engage in exactly the same behaviors that they are afraid may lead to their death just so that they can engage in those behaviors and prove that they will survive. It's called reactive risk-taking or counterphobic behavior.

The other misconception is that you should try and cheer people up when they're upset. When a child is acutely grieving, a lot of the comments that are made are intended to try and find something that's less upsetting. I always tell people that if it begins with "at least," it's probably something you should reconsider before saying. You know, "at least he's not in pain anymore," or "at least you had Christmas," or "at least you have another brother." All of those statements are usually said because the child either looks distressed, is acting distressed, or the adult assumes they're distressed and they don't want to see that. But that's not actually helpful to people. It doesn't allow them to express how they're feeling.

AFSA: Why can't grief just be dealt with at home with parents?

Schonfeld: Well, a couple reasons. For one thing, parents definitely need to be part of the response and the support for children. There's no question that they play a key role. Sometimes when deaths happen in the family, it may be difficult for the child, at least initially, to talk to their parents about it, because their parents are grieving themselves. And so, if a child starts to talk to a parent about a death that's happened in the family and the parent or surviving parents start crying, children will often think that they did something wrong or naughty, and they will turn around and try and support or cheer up their parent. They won't do it [discuss the death] again. So, school personnel may be in the unique

continued on page 18

Q&A With the New York Life Foundation

Why does New York Life believe it is important to support this cause?

Since 2008, the New York Life Foundation has worked with national and local bereavement experts to foster and support the childhood bereavement field. Our funding strategy has evolved over time. Our original contributions focused on direct service. Now we fund projects and convene groups and experts in order to build capacity and raise awareness of this issue.

In October 2012, the New York Life Foundation, in partnership with the American Federation of Teachers [AFT] and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, conducted a survey of over 1,200 members of the AFT on bereavement in classroom. Ninety-two percent of respondents reported that grief is a serious problem that deserves more attention in schools. Ninety-three percent of classroom teachers reported they had never received bereavement training, and only 3 percent said that their school or district offers this training. Given the large gap between the readiness of school personnel to support grieving students and the pressing needs of grieving children who are in virtually every classroom in the country, the New York Life Foundation decided to fund a project that would bring together experts and school professionals to develop an online resource, endorsed by the leading professional organizations representing educators and other school professionals, for professional development training to support grieving students.

How will the coalition help strengthen and empower school communities?

This collective effort to develop a set of resources approved by leading professional organizations, which will guide educators and other school personnel in supporting and caring for their grieving students, will strengthen and empower school communities by addressing the current gap in bereavement support and resources. All of the founding members are dedicated to working together and have collectively endorsed this first-of-its-kind resource that will provide practical, accessible information for teachers, administrators, school mental health professionals and other school personnel.

This ongoing initiative will strengthen schools by providing all members of the school community with the tools, insights and resources they need to understand and better support the grief journey of students who have lost a loved one.

What separates the coalition from other professional educational organizations?

Through the Coalition to Support Grieving Students, leading professional organizations in the education field have come together in an unprecedented manner in support of a single cause. The highly collaborative and interdisciplinary spirit of the coalition, as well as its members' sustained dedication to working together over time, has enabled this group to be uniquely effective in reaching a broad spectrum of educators and school community members across America. The coalition's members attest that the degree of agreement on this issue between professional organizations across the field is truly extraordinary.

Coalition members are united by the conviction that now is the time to provide an integrated, comprehensive approach to supporting grieving children at school. Because the group includes educational players across the entire school framework, the coalition is able to advocate for a cohesive, team-based model of grief support.

What responses are you hoping to receive from school communities?

Our primary goal is to provide a resource that will help raise awareness and support for grieving students in schools. The modules and supporting materials on the site provide the foundation for more structured presentations and can facilitate self-directed professional development.

In addition to the endorsement of this resource by coalition members, a dissemination strategy has also been created to inform and encourage their group members to use the site. New York Life will use our employees and field force of 12,000 agents in communities across the country to raise awareness of this resource at the local level. Our ultimate goal is for every school to have a bereavement plan in place to support students who have lost a parent, sibling or other beloved person. ■



NEW YORK LIFE
FOUNDATION



Responding to Grief

Locals Share Their Personal Experiences of Working Through Student Crisis and Trauma

Every day, school leaders face the challenge of helping their students work through grief and trauma. Through a survey, AFSA asked several members representing different roles of leadership within their school communities to discuss their firsthand experiences with these challenges.

"I am often alarmed by the extraordinary number of catastrophes impacting the lives of so many students within a given school year," said Robert Gregory, principal at the American History High School in Newark, New Jersey.

"We have students experiencing the sudden death of family members, the effects of violence within their neighborhoods and communities, as well as being directly involved in instances of trauma related to violence," said Jody Covington, principal of the Buffalo (New York) Academy for Visual and Performing Arts.

It was clear through all the responses that grief is prevalent on a daily basis and in many forms.

What are some of the biggest challenges you have faced when responding to a crisis?

AFSA members discussed a broad range of challenges. As the director of prevention intervention services for Hartford (Connecticut) Public Schools, Winston B. Johnson mentioned the importance of receiving up-to-date information in a crisis. He also spoke of the need for "more bilingual Spanish-speaking social workers and counselors" and the challenge of having sufficient time to meet with the principal and intervention teams when responding effectively to a school crisis.

"The biggest challenge is having the courage to respond to the situation without being overbearing or saying the wrong things," Johnson said. He also discussed the importance of connecting students with the right adult. "At times we think guidance counselors are the answer, but that doesn't always hold true. Children create bonds with various adults in a school community, and knowing who those adults are is of essence."

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As a behavioral health service program manager for the Oakland (California) Unified School District, Sandra Simmons talked of the challenge of being a grief counselor. She noted that one of the hardest parts about responding to a crisis “is that all of us are retriggered when a crisis occurs, and many of us do not have the self-soothing tools to cope with our grief, sadness, anger or fear.”

Covington spoke of lack of resources as being a major challenge for her community.

“Especially for teens, there is often a waiting list for accessing services and/or a limited number of medical professionals that are available to assist when making referrals,” she noted.

What are some of the biggest challenges you have faced when helping students work through the grieving process?

Respondents discussed the challenge of recognizing student grief, even when the effects of a crisis are not obvious. “It is essential that we not pass off their resilience by going on with our day as usual, but rather take the time to allow children to grieve, to ask questions and to process,” said Covington.

Once again, Gregory emphasized the importance of knowing students well enough to provide help. “The greatest challenge when helping students through the grieving process is knowing the right adults to support students who are grieving.”

While supporting students is always the top priority, AFSA respondents emphasized the importance of not forgetting the mental health of school staff members.

Vicenta Magaletta, head of the Student Services Department for the Boston Public Schools, recalled an incident where a student was shot and killed in a tragedy outside of school—and the resulting challenge of working through an external crisis that deeply affected the student services team. “We needed

to provide services for them, so that in return they could help the students.”

On a similar note, Johnson said the biggest challenge he faces is ensuring all students and staff receive counseling and therapy quickly enough, and that they are “able to stay engaged long enough to complete the grieving process.”

What impact do you see grief having on students?

Respondents made it clear the effects of grief are unique, depending on the student. Additionally, struggling with how to express their feelings is common for students. “They are overwhelmed and oftentimes may not know how to articulate or identify the root of their emotions,” said Covington.

“Academics is the last thing on their mind for some....for others who are in denial, academics is what they will concentrate on,” said Magaletta.

Johnson mentioned the negative effects of unresolved grief, including “depression, hopelessness, suicide ideations, anxiety disorders, sleep disorders, school failure, poor relationships, poor communication and failure to move developmentally through important life stages.”

“You’ll see their grades and attendance suffering, and their behavior shifting to acts of defiance and anger,” noted Gregory.

What are some of the most successful methods and strategies you have used to help students and your school community work through the process of grief?

Overall, respondents discussed the importance of including all parts of a school’s internal and external community when addressing grief.

“The collaborative efforts of school-based supports and community-based response teams within the schools and in the community has been most

effective throughout the grief process of students, staff and families in our school community,” said Johnson.

Gregory stressed cultivating real relationships with students. “I can’t emphasize enough the importance of knowing your students and the adults in your building to differentiate your responses accordingly.” At Gregory’s school, teachers identified as Star Polishers, who are selected by students, meet with 10 students once a week. “As school leaders we often don’t realize when students are experiencing grief, or are in a situation of crisis. Through the Star Polisher Advisory Program, we have become aware of the plethora of issues our students are confronted with on a daily basis.”

Covington discussed a similar program. “In our school community we have utilized the services of our Student Support Team (SST). The team consists of school counselors, a social worker and [a] psychologist. They provide interventions in the form of small group and individual counseling, facilitate referrals for clinical and long-term counseling, execute a ‘check-in/check-out’ system throughout the school day to monitor the students’ well-being, and conduct home visits for further assessment to assist the entire family unit.”

Why is the role of a school leader so important when helping students process grief?

While respondents noted the importance of school communities working as a complete unit throughout a crisis, they described school leaders as having the essential duty of setting the tone throughout the healing and recovery process.

“School leaders are looked at as a point person, and as the face associated with the school,” said Chen Kong-Wick, the violence prevention program manager at the Oakland Unified School District. She stressed that because of this perception, principals and administrators must lead the way in communicating a friendly, accessible and calm exterior.

"Leadership is critical because it provides students, staff, parents and the community with a sense of emotional support and security," said Johnson. "When the school community knows that their leader cares about their physical and emotional well-being and that they have taken the necessary steps [to] match their needs, the whole school culture is changed....When school leaders are visible in the midst of the crisis, it sends a very important message that 'we are all in this together' and 'we will get through this together.'"

As a leader in your school community, what do you think is most needed to help students process grief?

While aspects of resources and preparation were discussed in helping students through a crisis, respondents overwhelmingly stressed the need for training.

"It is critical that all school districts allow sufficient time to provide ongoing training to new building principals before the start of the school year," said Johnson.

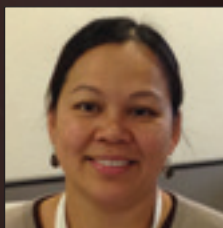
Simmons discussed the importance of training in terms of helping staff better "understand the function of our students' behaviors" and encouraging youth to "safely develop relationships that facilitate inclusion in our schools and increased academic and scholastic achievement."

Covington felt that as a school leader, being able to maintain and establish "a sense of normalcy while also allowing students to grieve and heal" is a crucial skill to have that requires sufficient professional development to build.

"Professional development is of essence and superintendents throughout the country must make this investment, as it has a tremendous impact on climate and culture throughout our school districts," said Gregory. "As situations of grief and crisis are becoming more exposed in the 21st century, school leaders need to be equipped with a variety of ways to respond." ■

"I believe that knowing the effects that trauma has on our students and families is important for our school teachers and leaders as they hold and develop positive school culture."

—Sandra Simmons, behavioral health service program manager, Oakland (California) Unified School District

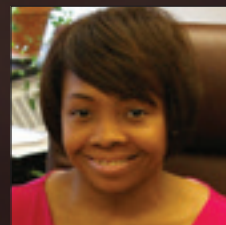


"School leaders are looked at as the point person and as the face associated with the school. So their role is to be accessible, friendly and calm."

—Chen Kong-Wick, violence prevention program manager, Oakland (California) Unified School District

"A school leader must have the capacity to understand the impact that grief and loss may have on a child and the entire school community. Children have difficulty separating home and school life. Their world is comprehensive. Therefore, a school leader must be cognizant of the experiences and community incidents that affect their daily lives."

—Jody Covington, principal, Buffalo (New York) Academy for Visual and Performing Arts

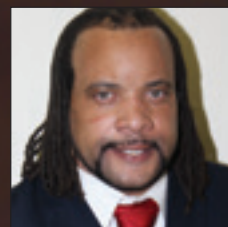


"When school leaders are visible for students, staff and [the] school community in the midst of the crisis, it sends a very important psychological and emotional message that they care and that 'we are all in this together' and 'we will get through this together.'"

—Winston B. Johnson, director of prevention intervention services, Hartford (Connecticut) Public Schools

"Finding the time to offer support and making it a priority is another challenge we face as school leaders. It is of essence that our students hear from us, whether that means showing up at a wake or funeral, writing a letter offering support to the family or having consistent check-ins with students so they know you are there. I can't emphasize enough the importance of knowing your students and the adults in your building."

—Robert Gregory, principal, American History High School, Newark, New Jersey



"Up-to-date grief training and counseling should be at the top of the priority list and done at the beginning of the school year for all staff."

—Vicenta Magaletta, head of student services, Boston Public Schools

What Grieving Students Want You to Know

Every child experiences loss differently and, as a school leader, it is important to implement the following guidelines for school personnel:

Show your true feelings

If there is a death of a member of the school community, everyone may be affected. Sometimes, adults worry that if they show signs of their own grieving, students will become dismayed, but sharing emotions can be extremely beneficial in helping children work through their own grief. Children know when adults are being honest and sincere. If they see adults are emotional, but have ways to cope, it helps children learn how to recognize and understand their own emotions.

It's OK to ask them questions

Adults often feel that asking children how they are doing will upset them because it will remind them of the loss, but it is important to remember it is the death that upsets children, not your questions. Children find it difficult to grieve in isolation and generally find it comforting when you ask them questions, because it gives them a chance to discuss their distress.

Be honest about death

Younger children will have more difficulty understanding death. If death is described as "everlasting sleep" or "passing away," it will only confuse them. It can also lead to fearing bedtime. Being honest with children about the four major concepts of death will help them understand what has happened:

1. Death is irreversible. If children do not understand that death is permanent, they may be angry that a deceased friend or family member chose not to return.

2. All life functions end completely at the time of death. If this concept is not understood, children will worry that a deceased friend or family member is in pain.

3. Everything that is alive eventually dies. Children may feel guilty and shameful if they don't understand this concept and they assume someone was selected to die because of something they did or something the person who died did.

4. There are physical reasons that someone dies. The more children understand the real reasons for a death, the less likely they are to feel guilty or ashamed.

They just need time

Older children may decline your first offer to speak with them. They may rather talk to their friends, be alone or they may feel they don't need to talk at all. Do not try and force a conversation, but let them know you are available to talk whenever they are ready. You also can help them find another adult they feel more comfortable speaking with about their grief. Acknowledge that talking about grief can be difficult, but that it can be a helpful way to work through their feelings.

Don't try to take away the pain

Avoid trying to cheer up grieving students with comments such as "At least he died a hero," or "At least you spent Christmas with him." Give them the opportunity to express their feelings. Children need you to talk less and listen more.

Reassure them they're not guilty

Children often feel guilty over a loss of a family member or friend, wondering what they did, didn't do, or should have done. Guilt also can be tied to survivor's guilt or for not feeling sad enough. Even if they do not show signs of these feelings, reassure children they are not responsible for the death.

They're not being selfish or uncaring

Sometimes following a crisis, children can act selfishly and inappropriately with peers. This is often a sign they are struggling with their feelings of grief and loss. Expressing concern and support can help improve their behavior.

They need your full support

Students experiencing grief may find it difficult to concentrate at their normal levels. Instead of waiting for school problems to arise, communicate regularly with parents, teachers and other key adults in the school community, such as coaches or club sponsors, about how students are doing. One way to support these students is to offer tutoring and temporary changes in test schedules or class work.

Reach out to the students' future teachers to help ease them through any transitions. Help preserve memories of lost friends and family through stories, pictures and continued mention of the person in conversations every day. It also is important to prepare for grief triggers by talking with students and identifying a place they can go when and if they occur. ■

ANTHONY SALVATORE:

Moving Forward After Sandy Hook Starts With a Better Understanding of Mental Health

On Dec. 14, 2012, 28 people in Newtown, Connecticut, including AFSA member and Principal Dawn Hochsprung, lost their lives in the tragic events at Sandy Hook Elementary and elsewhere that stunned the world.

After Sandy Hook, AFSA spoke with Anthony Salvatore, Newtown Middle School assistant principal and president of the Connecticut Federation of School Administrators, who shared his experiences of trying to make sense of what had happened and work through his grief.



Salvatore had a strong bond with Hochsprung and with Sandy Hook. He had worked alongside Hochsprung briefly as an assistant principal at the elementary school. Hochsprung also had been Salvatore's mentor when he began in Newtown in 1999.

Since Sandy Hook, Salvatore has taken significant action on student grief, working with such organizations as the TLC Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children and the Cove Center for Grieving Children, among others. Salvatore also has worked with national trauma and grief specialists at the federal and state levels, as well as counselors, social workers and psychologists from the school and local agencies.

After 35 years as an educator, Salvatore retired in June 2014, but he remains active with AFSA as a negotiator for the Connecticut Federation of School Administrators. AFSA spoke with Salvatore again to discuss Sandy Hook, the Coalition to Support Grieving Students, shifts in the nation's understanding of student grief, and the need for more attention on the importance of mental health.

As someone who has had a very direct experience working with student grief, how do schools play a critical role in a student's journey through grief?

Since I like to believe that schools and the leadership and the staff are up on the latest strategies, techniques and programs, I think schools can be a lifeline.

Parents often come to us for advice as the educators and principals, having the trust that we have the latest and the best information that we can share with them. Sometimes we can even give them referrals to outside agencies, and our follow-up to make sure they have followed through on those referrals is a super critical piece.

Have you seen a change in how the education community understands student grief and bereavement?

Yes, I have. Situations like Sandy Hook can happen at any time and anywhere. I think now there is definitely a better understanding of the need to address child grief and how grief affects kids differently. And it's not just over a horrendous tragedy like Sandy Hook, but it can be in the day-to-day instances like divorce or homelessness or financial problems at home, or parents arguing. I mean, all of those things can seriously impact a child. And that's one of the things that I at least hope most people have learned.

Even though we may not define an event as traumatic, we have to look at it from the child's perspective. And in the ensuing grief and fallout from that, we need to be sensitive. And that's where I think school leaders can play an important role. I know that I have said more than once, let's worry about taking care of the child first and we'll worry about the academics later because, if they're not emotionally stable, they are not

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going to learn anything anyway. So we shouldn't waste our time trying to bang information into them before they're emotionally taken care of. And that gives teachers permission to do that as well.

Even on the Monday we met with our staff after Sandy Hook, one of our younger teachers at the middle school stood up and asked if it was OK to hug our students and people began discussing, "Well, you have to watch out for liability, etc." and finally I stood up, and I was the District Safe School Climate coordinator as well as the building's, and I said, "Look, I'll invoke my authority as the coordinator of the district to tell you it's OK to hug kids." And there was kind of this sigh of relief that people had permission to hug kids. And I said it's a sad state of affairs that we even have to ask that question.

That sensory piece is a critical piece, not only in dealing with grief, but also dealing with the trauma that kids and adults go through.

How do you think the Coalition to Support Grieving Students can improve how we as a nation address grief in schools?

Well as a nation, I hope [it] can impact federal legislation to almost require training of all school personnel. I went through the emergency mental first aid responder course in Connecticut because as part of the gun law that was passed here after Sandy Hook, they required all the school climate coordinators to be trained, and that was one of the last things I did before I left.

For a lot of people, the training is new material, and it helps adults understand the impact on a child's mental health or their reaction to some type of trauma or loss. So that training piece is critical. But it has never been a top priority when people have other things to do. They don't want to hear about things that might happen or could happen because there are grades to do and lessons to plan, so I think that time has to be made to have that in place. That would be one thing I would like to see them do.

I think getting resources online is a great start, but it's kind of a passive method of training. You can follow a sheet of paper, but there is more impact having a face-to-face dialogue about grief and trauma and how best to work with kids.

ADVICE FROM DR. ANTHONY SALVATORE

What are some of the biggest challenges you have faced when helping students work through the grieving process?

- Understanding you must treat both trauma and grief—and that these are two very different conditions
- Recognizing it takes a lot of time to process grief
- Understanding that grief is not a linear process; any progress can disappear in an instant with a word, a smell, a sound or a song, a similar context or anniversary
- Accepting that you will lose class time with grieving students, with prolonged absenteeism from school in some cases
- Helping others, both adults and students, understand how grief impacts everyone differently

As a leader in your school community, what do you think is most needed to help school leaders be better equipped to help students and a school's community process grief following a crisis?

- Get trained in grief and trauma as soon as possible
- Become certified as a Mental Health First Aid responder
- Be prepared before a crisis occurs in your school or community
- Develop and continuously improve your crisis team in your school and community
- Develop regularly scheduled, ongoing mock drills with community and school crisis teams
- Include all building staff in security and crisis drills (i.e., cafeteria staff, educational assistants, custodians, interns, substitute teachers, volunteers in the building)

Any other pieces of advice for school leaders?

- Take care of yourself through counseling therapy, massage, yoga, meditation, etc.
- Contact your district's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for support services
- Take time to process *your own* personal grief
- Keep a sense of humor
- Understand that a crisis generates more questions than answers
- Rely on your personal network of family and friends for support, especially those who understand what you are going through; others will be there for you if you direct them to what you need—most will not know how to respond to you

Do you think our society has learned anything from Sandy Hook?

No. I was reading the paper this morning and Congress is trying to get a budget together and they're cutting \$50 million for mental health services. Of course that article was alongside an article on stronger gun laws for our country. I think they are going in the wrong direction. It's not the guns that are killing people, it's the person behind it, and those issues of mental health. Number One, removing the stigma is a critical piece, because I still think it's there a lot.

Just as we cannot ignore a grieving child, we cannot ignore those who are struggling with mental health alone and in secrecy. There were 28 victims at Sandy Hook including Adam and his mother, but we only talk about 26. While I recognize that it's difficult to acknowledge Adam as a victim, I think that this is an important step toward progress. And I think that until we can acknowledge that, even if it's incredibly painful and challenging to do so, we haven't gone through all the steps necessary to make true progress.

I think the grassroots level is going to be key in terms of getting people to understand that mental [illness] exists and that it's treatable like any other illness. It's as simple as that, and I would hope that the schools would be the leaders on that. But again, without the training, it's difficult.

Ten years ago I was doing workshops on adolescent depression and usually these workshops were packed. People just had no knowledge. And these were educators. These are people in education 20 and 30 years. They had no knowledge or very little knowledge on mental health issues and how it appears and/or what it looks like and how it can be treated.

And it's not the kid with his head on the desk. There are an increasing number of adolescents with depression that are your high performers, your top national scholars, your captain of the

Even though we may not define an event as traumatic, we have to look at it from the child's perspective. And in the ensuing grief and fallout from that, we need to be sensitive.

football team, cheerleaders, National Honor Society [members]. And the reason nobody knows it is because they have the ability to disguise it so that it goes undetected.

When I talked about adolescent depression a while back, I did a conference at a middle school in Philadelphia, and they gave me a room for about 60 people. There was standing room only and I spent over an hour after the workshop with a line of people—teachers, counselors, administrators—people who wanted to thank me for even broaching the topic, because they had depression when they were kids and no one recognized or acknowledged it. There was no treatment and

they went through hell in school and that was one of the reasons they went into education or counseling; to try and help other kids with what they went through. And I was just blown away that there [were] 20 or 30 people who waited to thank me. And to me, that says a lot on how many people are out there who people never know have mental health issues, because, again, there's a stigma. What do you do? It's better to say you have cancer than to say you have depression. When we can move beyond that, that will be my sign that this country gets it. ■

Notifying Your School Community

Well-informed teachers and school personnel can be a source of support for students. As a principal, implementing and managing an effective communication process within the school community is essential.

1. Notify the school crisis team and develop a plan

Activate the school crisis team. If you are notifying community members outside of school hours, initiate a phone tree to notify school staff and brief them before school. During school hours, distribute a written statement or hold a staff meeting.

2. Notify teachers and staff first

Meet with teachers and staff before school to discuss what is known about the death. This prepares teachers before seeing their students in class and allows them to ask questions.

3. Notify students face to face with familiar staff

If a teacher has died, make sure his or her class is notified by someone in the school community who is familiar to the students, or by a member of the school crisis team.

4. Prepare a statement for students

A prepared statement, including details about provided support services, allows teachers to give all students the same information simultaneously. Additionally, ensure teachers deliver the statement in a small and familiar setting, such as in homeroom or during first period classes.

5. Prepare a statement for parents

Send a letter home with students notifying parents about the death. Assure parents crisis teams are mobilized and services are available to students and families. Preparing a letter template in advance can be a valuable way to ensure parents receive clear and effective information in the face of a crisis or death.

6. Provide advice to families on how to prepare their children for funerals

Explain to children all the details that will happen during the service. Let them decide whether or not to attend and assure them they can leave at any time if they feel uncomfortable.

Find a familiar adult to be with the child throughout the service who can answer questions and provide support. Children will appreciate a role in the service. Offering a simple task, such as choosing flowers, may provide them with comfort. Allow younger children to play quietly in the back during the service to give them a sense of participation. Let older children sit with a friend in the family section. ■

Special Circumstances: Be Prepared

As school leaders, principals need to be prepared for the unfortunate circumstance of death at any time. The following procedures provide an outline of how to best handle an unexpected loss in a school's community:

Suicide and self-inflicted death

The suicide of a student leads to unique issues within the school.

1. Clarify with family about information they wish to disclose about the cause of death, and be aware of what information already has been shared publicly by a reliable source.
2. Identify students considered at greatest risk for mental health distress, particularly any students who may have known of the plan or students who may become "scapegoats" after the death.
3. Educate students, staff and parents about warning signs and symptoms of suicide and broadly distribute information about hot lines and support services.
4. Encourage students to seek help; destigmatize and legitimize the importance of mental health services.
5. While being sure to acknowledge the individual who died, avoid romanticizing or glamourizing suicide.
6. If possible, minimize the suicide's exposure in the media.
7. Be aware of any suicides in the larger community by maintaining good communication with other area schools, community mental health providers, agencies and the police.

When school is not in session

If a death occurs during vacation or a holiday, develop a plan with the school crisis team, including how best to contact the school community. The school building should be offered as a place for support services immediately after the event.

Once school is back in session, notify students and staff who were not contacted previously and provide additional supportive services to all students and school staff members.

When school liability is a concern

The circumstances of the death do not have to be disclosed, but the school must address the death and provide support services. Send letters to parents to inform them of the death and the available support services. ■

New Report Shows Controversial Newark “Renew School” Plan to be a Failure

A new report from the Alliance for Newark Public Schools highlights the failures of Newark, New Jersey, Superintendent Cami Anderson’s controversial “Renew Schools” program, finding that not only were student outcomes not met, but that the initiative “had a profound negative effect on student academic achievement.”

The Alliance for the Newark Public Schools is a coalition composed of various professional and community groups, including the City Association of Supervisors and Administrators (CASA), AFSA Local 20.

According to the report’s findings, all eight Renew Schools failed to meet Anderson’s target of a 50 percent proficiency rate in either the Language Arts Literacy (LAL) or mathematics (MATH) portion of the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (ASK), as set in her plan.

In every one of the 16 measures, the proficiency rate was found to be below 50 percent. In one school, the pass rate only reached 17.3 percent. The report also concluded that in comparison, pass rates fell in 13 of the 16 tests, making the pass rates lower than they were before the plan was implemented.

Dr. Leonard Pugliese, executive director of CASA and a coalition member, commented on the limited tools and support provided to school leaders at the Renew Schools:

“Principals, vice principals, teachers and other staff members at the Renew Schools are dedicated, hardworking professionals. Renew School principals were assured a number of conditions that would allow them to meet the needs of their schools and achieve

“We have repeatedly said that state management of the Newark public schools under Superintendent Anderson and her reform program has led to utter mismanagement of our schools and endangered the education of our youth, putting Newark’s future at grave risk.”

The report was distributed to the State Department of Education, the City Board of Education, Newark Public Schools and other dignitaries in hopes of putting an end to Anderson’s plan.

In every one of the 16 measures, the proficiency rate was found to be below 50 percent.

success. At the top of these conditions were autonomy and increased budgets at the building level, with greater flexibility in spending. Neither of these has been realized in ways that allowed principals to make school-based decisions that accelerate school change.”

Mayor Ras J. Baraka and city Chief Education Officer Dr. Lauren Wells issued a press release urging State Education Commissioner David Hespe to investigate Anderson’s initiative.

“The failure of the Renew Schools to meet the 50 percent target,” Pugliese concluded, “falls squarely at the feet of Superintendent Cami Anderson. She set the targets and she failed to provide the Renew Schools with the resources they needed to hit those targets. Superintendent Anderson made many promises, but she did not deliver. As the report concluded, ‘She failed spectacularly.’” ■



ATTENTION AFSA MEMBERS

AFSA Scholarship applications are due **Feb. 28, 2015**.
For details, visit **AFSAadmin.org/scholarship2015**.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

In mid-December, congressional leaders worked out a massive spending agreement to avoid a government shutdown. The \$1.1 trillion deal funds most federal programs through September 2015.

Prior to the deal's announcement, AFSA called on members of Congress to pass a yearlong omnibus bill rather than a short-term continuing resolution. School leaders need to plan in advance for their school year budgets, and the certainty of federal funds is paramount to their planning needs.

Highlights of the resolution include an increase of:

- \$75 million for the Child Care Development Block Grant;
- \$25 million for Title I funding;
- \$75 million for The Comprehensive School Safety Initiative;
- \$2 million for the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Program;
- \$25 million for IDEA Part B State Grants; and
- \$58,000 for IDEA Grants for Infants and Families.

Additionally, \$250 million will be provided to continue Preschool Development Grants.

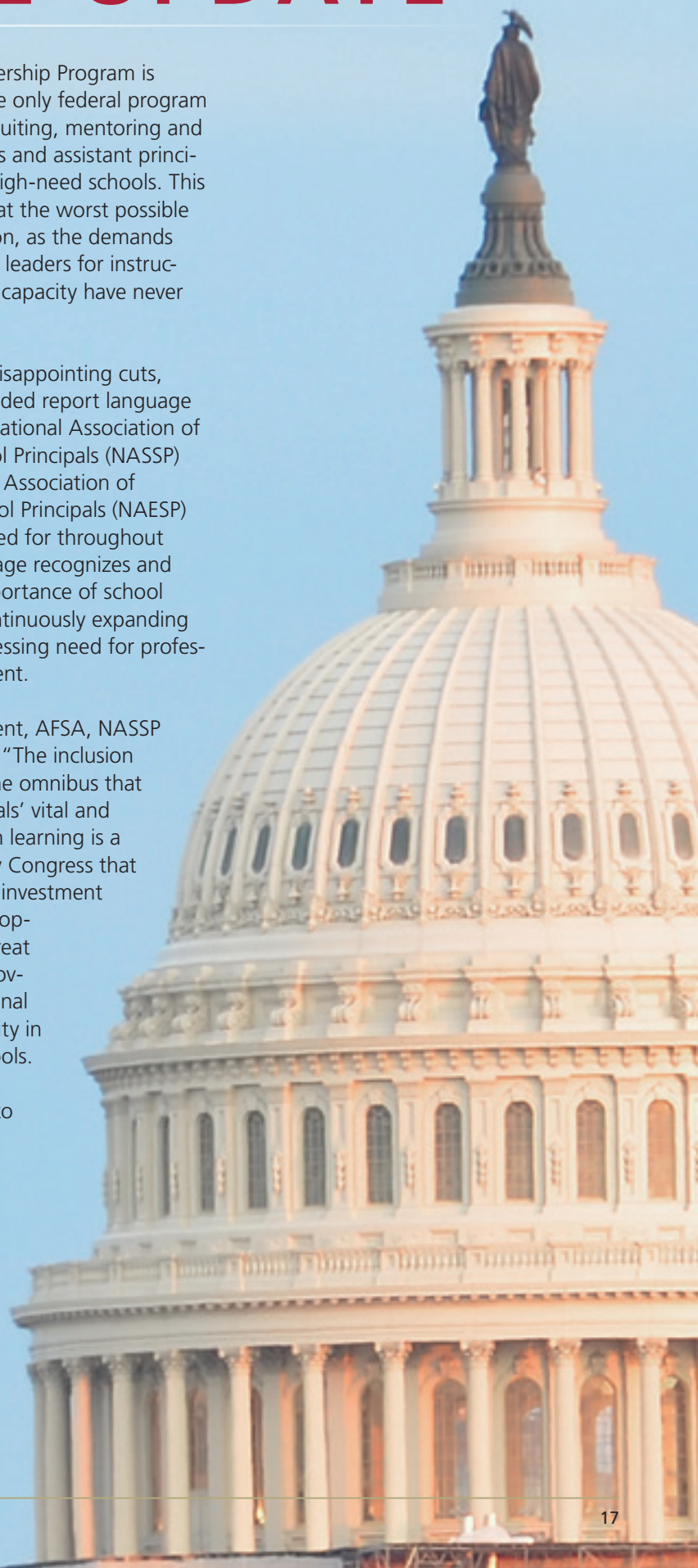
With these increases also come several cuts to and elimination of programs, including:

- A \$166 million cut to discretionary funding for the Department of Education;
- A freeze on Head Start funding at the 2014 level of \$8.6 billion;
- Elimination of Race to the Top funding; and
- A \$9.395 million decrease in the School Leadership Program.

The School Leadership Program is crucial, as it is the only federal program dedicated to recruiting, mentoring and training principals and assistant principals to serve in high-need schools. This decrease comes at the worst possible time for education, as the demands placed on school leaders for instructional leadership capacity have never been greater.

Despite several disappointing cuts, the final bill included report language that AFSA, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) strongly advocated for throughout 2014. The language recognizes and supports the importance of school leaders, their continuously expanding role and their pressing need for professional development.

In a joint statement, AFSA, NASSP and NAESP said, "The inclusion of language in the omnibus that identifies principals' vital and expanding role in learning is a clear mandate by Congress that we need greater investment in principal development. This is a great first step in improving the instructional leadership capacity in our nation's schools. We will continue the momentum to ensure that the Department of Education provides states with guidance as Congress directs." ■



CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN GRIEVING STUDENTS AND UNPREPARED EDUCATORS

continued from page 1

The New York Life Foundation has played a significant role in the formation of this partnership, generously providing all of the funding to support the coalition.

In 2012, AFT and New York Life conducted a nationwide survey of educators about grief at school. The study revealed that while educators genuinely wanted to help students, many lacked any training or resources on how to

address student grief. New York Life then decided to invite educational professionals to come together to form the Coalition to Support Grieving Students.

Formed in 2013 with the support of the New York Life Foundation and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, the coalition's mission is to create and share a set of industry-endorsed resources to empower school communities in the ongoing support of their grieving students. These resources have been created with the help and support of Dr. David Schonfeld, an expert in child bereavement and founder of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement.

The coalition will provide a variety of hands-on training and speaking

opportunities nationally, as well as online resources accessible to any member of the education community.

"We are proud and excited to be a part of this coalition," said Diann Woodard, president of AFSA. "It's rare to have the opportunity to work in partnership with our fellow leaders in education on such an important issue, and we look forward to creating meaningful change in the way we view and address student grief."

For more information, visit grievingstudents.com or stchristophershospital.com/pediatric-specialties-programs/specialties/690. ■

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID SCHONFELD

continued from page 5

position to be able to be a safer place for some of the conversations.

The other thing is that school personnel are with children much of their waking hours and so they bring their grief to school, and you want people in school to be able to understand that and be supportive.

Again, I'm not suggesting that what school teachers and other school personnel are going to do is the same thing as parents would do. It's just that they should be working together as a team to make sure that a child is not overwhelmed by their current homework and that they are able to balance some of the responsibilities of one class with another.

If they're communicating with the parent, the parent can say, "I think he's keeping up," or, "We're just struggling right now. Could you help him a bit more?" So it should really be done every place the children are, because they will bring that grief wherever they are.

The other issue is that there are things that we call grief triggers that may come

up, or be said, that will remind a child of the person that died, or the manner in which they died. So if you're doing a health education class and you're teaching an alcohol abuse curriculum and a child's brother died in a motor vehicle accident while under the influence of alcohol, it's good to know that, and it's a good idea to figure out how to help the child through that experience and maybe excuse them from a particular lesson, or at least tell them what the lesson is ahead of time. Or let them know that if there is anything in the discussion that bothers them, they can leave the room. And let them know how they can do that and where they can go.

I think the reality is that when someone that you care about deeply has died, you carry it with you everywhere, and it affects everything you do for a good period of time. And having people understand that and be there to assist you with it is just really helpful.

AFSA: What role do school principals have in helping students work through grief?

Schonfeld: They set the tone for the school. They set expectations. So if they consider something important, they can create policies that support and

ensure that educators have the training that they need. They make sure there are supports in place for school mental health providers and support personnel. They facilitate communication with parents. And they are there to tell their staff, "This is part of what we do. We're not here to be their parents, and we're not here to be their therapists. But we are here to help kids through life experiences."

AFSA: What strikes you most about this coalition?

Schonfeld: I think it's a very big deal that these 10 professional organizations have come together and are endorsing this material. It sends a very clear message that student grief is not specific to a discipline; it is an important topic for everyone in a school. It's extremely rare to bring together people from this many organizations who all are there wanting to collaborate on a shared vision, and it's been striking that, while it's been a couple years, our engagement level is still high.

I've been in a lot of different conferences, meetings and coalitions, and this one stands out because of the members' level of investment. It's truly unique. ■

CSA Scores a New Contract With New York City

At the annual convention for the Council of School Supervisors & Administrators (CSA), AFSA Local 1, President Ernest Logan, along with New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and City Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña, announced on Dec. 6 a new contract between CSA and New York City. The contract will substantially raise salaries for members by 18 percent over a nine-year period and provide members with back pay. CSA members have been working without a contract since 2010.

In CSA's new agreement, effective through 2019, teachers who were promoted as principals since 2009 will receive their retroactive pay from

their teachers' contract. Additionally, principals who moved to administrative positions within the Department of Education since 2010 will receive retroactive pay from their time as principals.

The new contract also outlines "master" or "model" principal positions, which will give administrators extra pay for performing duties beyond their role.

After the announcement, de Blasio commended the principals for their dedication to improving education. "In these months, Ernie has driven a hard bargain," de Blasio said. "There was always, at the same time, a spirit of partnership and a belief that we could get there together."

"With this agreement, CSA members will also have more authority to effectively manage their work days to be better able to deal with longer Monday and Tuesday class days; a more carefully monitored paperwork load; and a more expeditious system of investigations," said Logan. "All of these advances will help lessen certain gratuitous burdens on our school leaders and let them be better able to focus on their first priority, the instructional needs of our children."

For more information and updates, visit www.csa-nyc.org/node/1261. ■

UPCOMING EVENTS 2015

Feb. 19–21
**NASSP Ignite
15 Conference**
SAN DIEGO

Feb. 24–25
**AFL-CIO Executive
Council Committee
Meeting**
ATLANTA

April 17–18
GEB Meeting
NAPLES, Fla.

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The AFSA 14th Triennial Convention

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