

# Professional Preparation

## Take-Home Message

Professional development addressing support for grieving students is an essential component of training for teachers and other school staff. Unfortunately, it is offered far less often than needed. Most school professionals want to receive such training. There are resources to help make effective professional development possible.

## Bereavement Will Affect Most Students

Approximately 5% of children nationwide will experience the death of a parent by the time they reach age 16. About 90% of all students will experience the death of someone close to them by the time they complete high school. It is likely there is at least one grieving student in every classroom, in every school, every day.

Bereavement has a profound impact on learning, development, and the emotional adjustment of children. The unique role schools can play in supporting grieving students is powerful. It is important to provide training in this area for school professionals. Ideally, introductory training would be provided at the preservice level, and continuing opportunities for learning would be offered for experienced teachers and school staff.

## School Professionals Want Training

Many teachers and other school professionals feel unprepared and apprehensive about reaching out to provide support to grieving students. They worry that they will say or do something clumsy or wrong, make matters worse, or start a conversation they don't know how to finish.

Surveys examining this issue were conducted in 2012 and 2020 by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the New York Life Foundation, and Hart Research Associates. AFT members recognized that bereavement is common in the lives of children and that students have a wide range of problems and challenges after experiencing a significant loss. Teachers reported that they wanted to provide support and assistance to their students when they were affected by a death. They recognized the unique role they can play in these situations.

But the single most important barrier preventing them from providing this support was insufficient training and/or



professional development. An overwhelming majority of teachers— 93% in 2012 and 85% in 2020 —reported they had never received any training about supporting grieving students. Less than 10% of schools or districts reported offering such training in both surveys.

## Schools Can Meet the Challenge

Schools can help meet this gap by ensuring that in-service training addresses the topic of children and grief. This should be offered as a component of ongoing professional development in relevant school professions. The benefits of such training are considerable. This training can:

- Provide school personnel with the information and skills necessary to support grieving children and their families.
- Establish norms about what school professionals can and should do to support grieving students.
- Deliver a clear message that supporting grieving students is important.
- Emphasize the importance of school professionals in providing this support, and establish that these are valued skills for them to acquire.
- Demonstrate that the school administration is sensitive to teachers' needs in this area and committed to providing support to assist them in their efforts.

It is best to plan and offer training prior to a school incident or crisis so that school staff will be better able to respond.

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## There Are Resources to Help

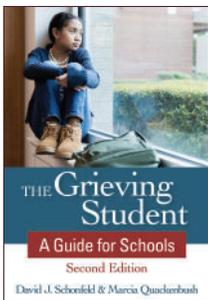
Schools can collaborate with professionals, agencies, and organizations in the community that provide bereavement support. This might include agencies such as a children’s bereavement center, a hospice program, or a mental health agency. These groups can serve as referral resources and may also be able to offer direct services at the school—perhaps bereavement peer support groups or individual counseling with students.

They may also be able to assist with ongoing consultation and training. School-based health, mental health, and counseling staff can also be asked to provide training to educators in their own school or district.

Often these trainings are planned and provided in the aftermath of a school crisis or school-wide bereavement. While this is generally better than offering no training at all, “just in time” trainings usually are not actually in time. When school staff is personally affected by a situation—they knew the individual who died, they are close to bereaved students—it is more difficult to consider the topic, incorporate the information, and learn the relevant skills.

## Look to the Coalition to Support Grieving Students

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students can provide the spark for targeted discussions among school staff. There are abundant resources available to form a foundation for more structured presentations. There are materials that can facilitate self-directed or small-group professional development. The website houses other resources that can be useful in training or personal education.



For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to *The Grieving Student: A Guide for Schools* by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.

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