



Schools: Key Players in Suicide Prevention

Reasons Why Schools Should Address Suicide

As institutions dedicated to children and youth, schools have their own unique reasons for preventing suicide among their students.

1. Maintaining a safe school environment is part of a school's overall mission.

Schools have an implicit contract with parents to protect the safety of their children while they are in the school's care. Fortunately, suicide prevention is consistent with many other efforts to protect student safety:

- Many activities designed to prevent violence, bullying, and the abuse of alcohol and other drugs may also reduce suicide risk among students.
- Programs that improve school climate and promote connectedness help reduce risk of suicide, violence, bullying, and substance abuse.
- Efforts to promote safe schools and adult caring help protect against suicidal ideation and attempts among LGBT youth.
- Some activities designed to prevent suicide and promote student mental health can reinforce the benefits of other student wellness programs.



2. Students' mental health can affect their academic performance.

Depression and other mental health issues can interfere with students' ability to learn and can affect their academic performance. According to the 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey:¹

- Nearly half of youth receiving grades of mostly D's and F's felt sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 or more weeks in a row during the 12 months before the survey, compared to less than one-quarter of youth receiving mostly A's.
- 1 out of 5 high school youth receiving grades of mostly D's and F's attempted suicide at least once during the 12 months before the survey, compared to 1 out of 18 youth receiving mostly A's.

3. A student suicide can significantly impact other students and the entire school community.

Knowing what to do following a suicide is critical to helping students cope with the loss and to prevent additional tragedies from occurring. Adolescents can be susceptible to suicide contagion (sometimes called the *copycat effect*), which can result in the relatively rare phenomenon of suicide clusters in which an unusually high numbers of suicides occur in a small geographic area over a brief time.

How Schools Can Help Prevent Suicide

Suicide prevention experts recommend using a multifaceted approach in which specific components are implemented in a particular sequence. These components include:

1. Protocols for helping students at risk of suicide, including:

- A protocol for helping students who may be at risk of suicide
- A protocol for responding to students who attempt suicide at school
- Agreements with community providers to provide mental health services to students

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2015). Making the connection: Suicidal thoughts and behaviors and academic grades. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/DASHfactsheetSuicidal.pdf



This material was developed thanks to the support of Universal Health Services, Inc. (UHS).



2. Protocols for responding to a suicide death, including:

- Steps to take after the suicide of a student or other member of the school community
- Identification of staff responsible for taking these steps
- Agreements with community partners to help the school in the event of a suicide

3. Staff education and training, including:

- Information for all staff about the importance of suicide prevention
- Training for all staff on recognizing and responding to students who may be at risk of suicide
- Training for appropriate staff on assessing, referring, and following up with students identified as at risk of suicide

4. Parent education, including:

- Information for parents about suicide and related mental health issues
- Strategies to gain a sufficient level of participation in parent education programs

5. Student education, including:

- One or more programs to engage students in suicide prevention
- Integration of suicide prevention into other student health/mental health initiatives

6. Screening:

- A program to screen for risk of suicide
- Parent, staff, and community mental health provider support for screening

Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools contains information about how to implement these components in your school. You can download this free toolkit at <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Preventing-Suicide-A-Toolkit-for-High-Schools/SMA12-4669>.

Source: Adapted from Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (2012). Preventing suicide: A toolkit for high schools. Waltham, MA: Education Development Center.



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