

CRITICAL INCIDENT POLICY

1. **CONTEXT**
2. **ESTABLISH FACTS**
3. **IMMEDIATE RESPONSE**
4. **INFORM**
5. **SHORT-TERM ACTION**
6. **FUNERAL SERVICES (where applicable)**
7. **MEDIUM / LONG-TERM ACTION**
8. **REVIEW**

CONTEXT

The mission of Athboy Community School is to provide quality, holistic and inclusive education for the community. Our aim is to create a safe and caring environment, which encourages pupils to reach their full potential in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

In keeping with our aim to create a safe and caring environment, Athboy Community School promotes a pastoral care system, which is receptive to the changing needs of pupils and staff. The Critical Incident Policy is part of that system.

A critical incident is “an incident or sequence of events that overwhelms the normal coping mechanism of the school and disrupts the running of the school.”¹

ESTABLISH FACTS

Any staff member becoming aware of a traumatic incident will inform Principal or Deputy Principal. (Contact numbers, term-time, holiday time). The contact tree system may be used, particularly during school holiday times. The crisis response team will be convened consisting of Principal, Deputy Principal, Head of Pastoral Care, Guidance Counsellor and Chaplain. A full staff meeting will be held as soon as possible (8.00am), before the normal school day begins, when the CI occurs after school hours during the school week. A file containing all relevant contact numbers, templates of letters to staff, media, parents and guardians, and specific roles of members of the Crisis Response Team (as previously assigned) will be made available to those on the team. The CRT will consist of the Team Leader (Principal and in his absence, Deputy Principal), the Staff Liaison Person, the Student Liaison Person, The Parent Liaison Person, the Community

¹ Source: *Responding to Critical Incidents in Schools*, National Educational Psychological Services. (NEPS)

Liaison Person and the Media Liaison Person. The Principal (in his absence the Deputy Principal) will take on the responsibility of media access to the school. Year Heads and other teachers will be called on as required. The Guidance Counsellor and Chaplain will coordinate the crisis response enabling the Principal and Deputy Principal to be more available.

It is crucial that the school has correct and accurate information regarding the crisis. This may involve contacting others such as hospitals, Garda, parents (contact numbers). The family's version of a tragic death must be respected.

IMMEDIATE RESPONSE

The Crisis Response Team will assign tasks within the group.

Principal will inform staff with as much factual information as possible.

Deputy Principal will place a notice in prominent positions notifying all staff to go to the staff room on arrival at school.

The crisis response team will agree on a common statement with regard to the crisis.

School routine for the day will be kept as normal as possible.

Staff members not present initially will be informed as soon as possible. SMS messaging will be also be used for this purpose where possible.

Class Teachers will avail of the written statement: *"Breaking the news to students"* (See Sample A below).

The Chaplain will coordinate a suitable prayer service and arrange to visit the home of the bereaved with other staff.

The Guidance Counsellor will contact NEPS (phone numbers).

The Principal and Deputy Principal will draft a letter for parents and guardians. (Sample B below).

The Principal will liaise with those at an accident site (in the case of an out of school crisis). Contact numbers for teachers accompanying groups need to be available to Principal.

When the critical incident occurs in the school itself, during the school day, the following steps will be taken in addition to the procedures above:

1. The site of the incident will be out of bounds to the general school population.
2. In the case of a critical incident involving a student, his/her Year Head will be informed by the School Chaplain or in his/her absence by the Principal or Deputy Principal. The Chaplain will then meet the class group most directly affected by the critical incident and in the company of the Year Head inform them of the incident.

3. A suitable room will be made available to that class group for the rest of the day. Some students may wish to go home and may do so if signed out by a parent or guardian.
4. Chaplains **and Guidance Counsellors** from neighbouring schools **may** be called on by the Principal, or in his/her absence by the Deputy Principal or Chaplain, to offer professional support to students who wish to meet them. Rooms will be made available for such meetings. **Records will be kept by visitors and passed on to the Crisis Response Team leader.**

INFORM

Staff will be alerted and informed first. Note will be taken of the difficulties arising from the split campus of the school. The chairperson of the Board of Management will be informed. Clergy in the local parishes will also be contacted. An agreed common statement will be used when informing students and others, thus reducing the spread of rumour. The statement will give the facts as they are known in a sensitive manner, highlighting the supports that will be available and indicating the actions that are planned (Sample C below). Principal, Deputy Principal and Chaplain will inform students in the classes most affected by the crisis.

In dealing with enquiries from the media the Principal or his/her representative will act as a liaison. Names, addresses and telephone numbers will not be released. Students and staff will be discouraged from dealing with the media. The agreed statement will also be given as a response to enquiries from anxious parents.

SHORT-TERM ACTION

Pastoral care will be needed for the students, teachers, parents and guardians. On day one of the crisis the Deputy Principal, Guidance Counsellor, the Pastoral Care Coordinator and the Chaplain will be free of classes in order to coordinate initial counselling for the most affected students. A room will be allocated as a quiet room for the first day of the crisis. Care will be taken to balance the need to continue with the normal routine and the accessibility of support personnel for students.

All staff will be on the alert for students in particular need.

FUNERAL SERVICES (where applicable)

The Chaplain, on behalf of the school, will confer with local clergy in relation to school involvement. The Principal will consider if it is appropriate for students to attend as a school group or with their parents/guardians. The Board of Management will make the decision as to the closure of the school on the day of the funeral. If the school is to be

closed, notification will be made to parents, guardians, bus drivers and visitors of the proposed closure.

MEDIUM/ LONG-TERM ACTION

The Pastoral Team will monitor students with the support of the entire staff. A day of reflection or retreat may be helpful to the class most affected by the tragedy. An annual remembrance service will be organized by the Chaplain for past students, parents, guardians and staff of the school in the month of November. The Chaplain and Guidance Counsellor will communicate with teachers, parents and guardians offering their support. The Chaplain may visit the bereaved parents and guardians regularly in the weeks and months following the tragedy. The Board of Management will encourage and fund specialist staff training and links with outside agencies in the area of change, loss, death, suicide and crisis issues.

As part of the SPHE syllabus lessons will be taught in each school year on suicide prevention, with emphasis on problem solving techniques and on the services available both in school and in the wider community. Contact details of helping agencies will be published in the school journal every year.

Teachers will be encouraged by the Principal or Deputy Principal to be alert to behaviour that would suggest that students might be at risk of self-harm or suicide and to pass on such concerns to the relevant Year Heads or to the Guidance Counsellor or to the Chaplain **who will deal with them to the best of their ability and, where appropriate, refer the person in need for further professional help.**

Students who are part of the Peer Mentoring Programme will be trained to pass on concerns they may have for the safety of fellow students to their contact teachers. **As part of the training for the Peer Mentoring Programme, the students will be helped to know clearly when to pass on information to teachers and how to care for their own mental health.**

REVIEW

Procedures will be reviewed annually in the light of experience and suggestions from staff, management, Parents' Council and Students' Council. Other schools and professionals will be contacted.

Formally adopted at Board of Management Meeting on 15th January 2007.

Reviewed on 28th January 2008.

Amended on 7th May 2008.

Date for next review: January 2009.

Sample A

Notes to Staff re: Breaking news of tragic incident.

(Suggested script)

“I have sad news for the class today. It is difficult to tell you. Yesterday evening a very sad thing happened. A boy/girl in _____ Year, _____, died tragically in _____. This is a huge shock to _____’s family and to all of us here in the school. The next few days will be very difficult for all of us and it is important that everyone be as supportive to one another as possible. I would like to remind you that help is available here in the school for anyone who might be finding it difficult to cope at any time. You should contact any member of staff if you are worried about yourself or another pupil. In particular Mr. Tynan and Ms Clarke will be available to all students.

Prayer:

Let’s say a short prayer for _____ and _____ family.

e.g. Hail Mary.

You may be asked by reporters for details about _____. Please do not give any information. An official statement on behalf of the school has been prepared and the reporters should talk to Mr. Leavy.

It is difficult for me to continue class, and I know it is difficult for you all, but it’s probably best for us all if we continue as normally as we can. So let’s begin.....”.

Notes to teacher:

- Please take note of individual pupils who appear particularly upset and pass on to Joe/Annette.
- Please do not make any statements to media. An official statement has been prepared.
- Please shred this page when you have finished.

Sample B Letter to Parents/Guardians

Date

Dear Parents/Guardians,

The school has experienced the tragic death of one of our _____ Year Students, _____. We are deeply saddened by _____ death.

The school staff is helping pupils cope with this tragedy.

It is possible that your child may have feelings that he/she may like to discuss with you. You can help your child by taking time to listen and encouraging him/her to express their feelings. It is important to give students truthful information that is appropriate to their age.

If you feel your child is very distressed and you would like advice or assistance please contact 046/9487894. Ms. Annette Clarke (Guidance Counsellor) and/or Mr. Joe Tynan, (Chaplain) will be available.

The National Educational Psychological Service will also be available to support the school.

The school will facilitate the attendance of _____ Year groups, at the funeral service on _____, with the permission of parents/guardians. Bus transport will be provided. Parents/guardians of other pupils who wish to attend are asked to make their own arrangements. All pupils attending the service are asked to wear full school uniform.

Yours sincerely,

Anthony Leavy (Principal).

Sample C Statement for Media re: Tragic Incident

It is with profound sadness that the Management, Staff, Students and Parents of Athboy Community School have learned of the tragic death of _____, a _____ Year student. Our sincerest sympathy is extended to the family of _____.

A Critical Incident Response Plan has been put in place. Procedures are in place to ensure that all in the school community affected by this loss are given help to cope at this time. Prayer services have been held in the school.

Our prayers and support are with everyone affected by this tragedy.