

Surviving School Crisis'

As a 23 year veteran of high schools, I have dealt with my share of tragedies- accidents, staff deaths, student deaths and student suicides. Brighton High School had not experienced a suicide in over 5 years. On May 1, 2016, that changed. At 5:00 p.m. I received a call from our police chief who let me know a 15 year old boy had shot himself in a backyard near the school. He would call me back with a name once he had it. When Chief Russo called back and told me it was Justice, my heart sank. I knew Justice as one of my skaters and one who had some challenges. With the help of one of my amazing assistant principals, I began notifying my staff, including my hall monitors who know my kids better than anyone. They were both devastated but, told me a sweet story about them giving Justice a hug just a few days earlier and telling him they loved him. He had the biggest smile on his face. This brought peace to my heart knowing that Justice KNEW he was loved at school. The next few days were spent with our district crisis team counseling kids and parents alike. We attended the services Saturday, May 7 with my student government kids in tow. This was not their circle of friends, but they made sure to be visible and support where they could. The following Tuesday, May 10, I received a phone call just after 8:00 a.m. Another sophomore, Kave, had committed suicide at his Dad's home. He was in the same circle of friends with Justice and we began the process over again. It took three weeks for the school to settle down. It took three weeks for my administrative team to have time to acknowledge our feelings. I still have my weepy moments, caring about these kids and worrying about them. Thanks to all of you who shared a kind word, a hug and gave me encouragement to keep my chin up!

A few tips when dealing with a school crisis or tragedy:

1. Communication

- a. We use REMIND to notify our staff regarding crisis', meetings and other school issues. I highly recommend it!
- b. We use our school wide email system to notify parents. I communicated regularly, encouraging parents to talk with their kids about the deaths.
- c. Individual phone calls were made to parents of students we were particularly concerned with.

d. Sample Letter home:

<http://www.ksl.com/?sid=39727130&nid=148&title=brighton-high-administrators-concerned-after-2-student-deaths-in-a-week>

2. **Student Council Visibility:** This may not be their immediate friend group but, they are student representatives. Our leaders were present at two vigils at our skate park and at the services.
3. **Allow kids to show their concern:** Our student leaders facilitated a "Post-It Poster" allowing kids to leave a thought and individual post-Its to be placed on a larger poster that was displayed at school and at the services.



4. **Care for the Staff:** The teachers are on the front lines. Provide them with accurate information. I am inserting a link to an excellent hand out created by Patrick Maurer and provided to me by Sara Nilles.
<http://oasc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/adversity.pdf>
5. **Start the Healing:** We brought in Kyle Scheele to speak to our students during the day and our parents at night. I have over 2000 students and this is a team effort. Our parents needed support to help their kids. The focus was not suicide, rather, being your best self and above all, being kind.
6. **Follow-Up:** I met with my student government kids in Oregon and specifically talked about how we need to reach out and make sure our students know they are loved and supported. There is a certain momentum right now where we have broken through with some of our "fringe" kids and we need to pull them in and love them.

Charisse Hilton, High School Principal
Executive Director: Utah Assoc. of Student Councils

Shared with permission