

Suicide Prevention

Policy Q & A



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This policy Q & A addresses the topics related to the legal requirements for suicide prevention training of school personnel.

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What is the difference between suicidal ideation, suicide attempt, and suicide?

Suicide is the deliberate termination of one's own life. A suicide attempt is a failed attempt to terminate one's own life. The attempt may be planned or spontaneous. The attempt was either incomplete due to a miscalculation by the individual, by intervention of a second party, or by the individual changing his/her mind part-way through the attempt. Suicidal ideation is thinking or fantasizing about taking one's own life without the presence of any action to carry out the thoughts.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014) webpage, suicide is defined as "death caused by self-directed injurious behavior with an intent to die as a result of the behavior." A suicide attempt is defined as "a non-fatal self-directed potentially injurious behavior with an intent to die as a result of the behavior; a suicide attempt may or may not result in injury." And, suicidal ideation is defined as "thinking about, considering, or planning for suicide" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014).

Are educators required to be provided training in suicide prevention?

Yes. The state of Nebraska requires that all teachers be trained in school security and suicide awareness and prevention. Additionally, beginning in the 2015-2016 school year, every public school

nurse, teacher, counselor, school psychologist, administrator, school social worker, and any other school personnel must receive at least one hour of suicide awareness and prevention training every year (Neb. Rev. Stat 79-2-146, 2014). This policy acknowledges that anyone working in a school should be aware of and receive some training related to preventing suicide.

Why do schools have a special responsibility for taking action to prevent suicide?

The material which responds to this question is quoted directly from p.10-11 of the SAMHSA publication *Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools*. The reference list in that document contains the references included in this section:

1. Maintaining a safe school environment is part of a school's overall mission. There is an implicit contract that schools have 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 (Epstein & Spirito, 2009). Programs that improve school climate and promote connectedness help reduce risk of suicide, violence, bullying, and substance abuse (Resnick et al., 1997; Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002).
- Efforts to promote safe schools and adult caring also help protect against suicidal ideation and attempts among LGB youth (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006).
- 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 the ability to learn and can affect academic performance. According to the 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (CDC, 2010b):

- Approximately 1 of 2 high school students receiving grades of mostly Ds and Fs felt sad or hopeless. But only 1 of 5 students receiving mostly grades of A felt sad or hopeless.
- 1 out of 5 high school students receiving grades of mostly Ds and Fs attempted suicide. Comparatively, 1 out of 25 who receive mostly A grades attempted suicide.

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 prevent additional tragedies that may occur. Adolescents can be susceptible to suicide contagion (sometimes called the "copycat effect"). This may result in the relatively rare phenomenon of "suicide clusters" (unusually high numbers of suicides occurring in a small area and brief time period; Gould, Wallenstein, Kleinman, O'Carroll, & Mercy, 1990).

4. Schools have been sued for negligence for the following reasons.

- Failure to notify parents if their child appears to be suicidal
- Failure to get assistance for a student at-risk of suicide
- Failure to adequately supervise a student at-risk of suicide

(Doan, Roggenbaum, & Lazear, 2003; Juhnke, Granello, & Granello, 2011; Lieberman, 2008–2009; Lieberman, Poland, & Cowan, 2006). See the SAMHSA publication *Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools* for references.

What should be included in suicide prevention policies and procedures?

A school policy on suicide prevention should include information on confidentiality, suicide prevention methods, intervention strategies, and what should happen after a suicide has occurred. Consult your district for requirements or specific procedures that are already in place. Typically a school attorney may assist in creating these policies, as a school can be held responsible for a student's suicide if it is found that someone at the school knew that the student may harm him or herself and preventative steps were not taken (Suicide Prevention Coalition of Warren and Clinton Counties, 2010).

The Trevor Project, the National Association of School Psychologists, the American School Counselor Association, and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention have created a model school policy on suicide. Within the document are definitions and resources, along with other relevant information, from bullying and suicide to parental involvement. The website contains other resources as well. <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/pages/modelschoolpolicy>.

What should be done if a student is reported to have talked about suicide?

Any student who talked about suicide should be brought in immediately to talk with a school counselor, psychologist, or social worker and then referred to the student's parents, and a mental health professional.

What about FERPA confidentiality when considering reporting of suicidal intent?

“Under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), parents are generally required to provide consent before school officials disclose personally identifiable information from students' education records. There are exceptions to FERPA's general consent rule, such as disclosures in connection with health or safety emergencies. This provision in FERPA permits school officials to disclose information on students, without consent, to appropriate parties if knowledge of the information is necessary to protect the health or safety of the student or other individuals. When a student is believed to be suicidal or has expressed suicidal thoughts, school officials may determine that an articulable and significant threat to the health or safety of the student exists and that such a disclosure to appropriate parties is warranted under this exception (Department of Education, 2010).” (quoted from p.10 of the SAMHSA publication *Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools*)

What are the steps of assessing suicidal intent? A licensed mental health worker (i.e., school psychologist, school social worker) should talk to the student. If it is deemed that the student is suicidal- has the intent and possible means to complete suicide- the student should not be left alone or allowed to leave school property without a parent or guardian. Parents or guardians must be informed of the situation and what the next steps should be, such as taking the student to a licensed mental health provider or to the local hospital emergency room for assessment. Development of a crisis response plan or safety plan will differ because each student and situation is assessed individually.

If a student is threatening imminent suicide in the school, should I call the police?

Yes. Call the police and the student's parents.

What should be done in a school after a suicide occurs?

If the suicide occurs at school, call 911 and the student's parents. If the school has a crisis plan, it should be enacted immediately. Counseling should be open to all students for the next few weeks. If the suicide occurs outside of school, counseling should still be available to all students. More information can be found in the Suicide Prevention Resource brief.

Briefs on Suicide Prevention

For a more detailed explanation of suicide prevention in schools see the *Suicide Prevention Strategy Brief*. For a more detailed explanation of several examples of suicide reduction programs, see the *Suicide Prevention Resource Brief*. Both are available at: <http://k12engagement.unl.edu>.

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References:

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