

# **St. Mary's College Dundalk**



## **Responding to Critical Incidents Policy**

Approved by Board of Management on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2009

## **School Mission Statement**

St. Mary's College is a Catholic Co-educational Secondary School under the patronage of the Marist Fathers. The primary aim of this school, through its spiritual and humanistic endeavours, is to promote and develop a sense of community where those entrusted to its care can be brought to the fullness of their human potential.

The school, through its academic, pastoral and spiritual undertakings strives to provide for the holistic development and welfare of each of the students in its care.

## **Creation of a coping, supportive and caring ethos in St. Mary's College**

We in St. Mary's College have concern for the whole person throughout the life of the school. We strive to have a good network of relationships in the school.

- We aim for a physically safe environment by having an evacuation plan, fire drills, fire exits and fire extinguishers and fire blankets.
- We aim to enhance psychological safety and well being through the provision of SPHE, CSPE and RE programmes.
- We provide policies and structures that enhance psychological safety. These include pastoral care policy and structures, bullying policy, first year buddy system, school completion and rainbow/spectrum programmes.
- Staff members are released for in-services relevant to psychological well being and safety.
- Workshops and staff talks are provided on relevant topics.

## **Aim of this policy**

This policy is intended to effectively manage a critical incident and the aftermath of any such incident primarily affecting our students and, in so far as it can, encompassing the whole school community.

The aim is to formulate a very clear set of procedures that would best manage the school's response to a critical incident.

## **Objectives**

1. To define a critical incident
2. To formulate critical incident management team and 'ready to go packs' of procedures and roles applying to each stage of the critical incident.
3. To formulate a critical incident management plan with immediate, short, medium and long term actions to cope with a critical incident.
4. To facilitate a whole school team approach to managing a critical incident.
5. To create "ready to go packs' for The Critical Incident Management Team and an Emergency Contacts List.

## **Defining a critical incident**

***"A critical incident is an incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanism of the school and disrupts the running of the school"***  
***(NEPS 2003)***

### **Types of incidents include;**

- Family bereavements
- Death of a member of the school community through sudden death, accident, illness or suicide
- An accident on or off school premises
- School fire or explosion
- A physical attack or intrusion
- Severe physical violence in the school
- Serious damage to the school building
- An accident/ tragedy in the wider community

## **Creation of a critical incident management team**

This is a group of individuals from the staff of a school who know the community, the students and each other well enough to make the necessary decisions called for when an incident occurs.

### **What is its goal?**

- To be in place on an on-going basis.
- To return the school to as close to normality as soon as possible.
- To reduce the immediate and long term detrimental impact on students, teachers and families.

## **The critical incident management team for the school year 2009-10**

### **TEAM LEADER**

### **STAFF LIAISON**

### **STUDENT LIAISON/COUNSELLOR**

### **FAMILY LIAISON**

### **COMMUNITY LIAISON**

### **MEDIA LIAISON**

### **ADMINISTRATIVE ROLE**

**Mr Con Mc Ginley**

**Ms Briege Kelly**

**Ms Rosie Reynolds**

**Ms Bernie Deery**

**Ms Anita Morgan**

**Ms Catherine Kirk &**

**Ms Pippa Brady**

**Mr Tony Butler**

## **Roles of Team**

### **TEAM LEADER**

- The principal would normally be in this role.
- The principal endeavours to co-ordinate the response of the school.
- The principal confirms the incident has occurred and clarifies the facts.
- The principal expresses sympathy to the family and assures them of the school support.
- The active participation and sensitivity of the principal can set the tone for the manner in which the entire school responds.
- The principal alerts team members of a crisis, convenes a meeting and co-ordinates the tasks of the team.
- The principal keeps in touch with all team members.
- The principal will prepare announcements for staff and students and will decide on when, how and who will break the news.
- The principal will organise a special staff meeting as required.
- The principal communicates with Board of Management, Dept. of Education and Science, NEPS and Exam Commission as necessary.
- Hold a meeting of the critical incident team to evaluate the effectiveness of the response.

### **STAFF LIAISON**

- Convenes an information meeting for teachers and gives them facts, names of vulnerable students and explain the range of reactions that may occur. They give the staff an outline for the routine of the day.
- Is alert to vulnerable staff members and encourages sensitivity and support from others.
- Gives each member of the critical incident team his or her 'ready to go information pack'.

### **STUDENT LIAISON/COUNSELLOR**

- Liaise with parents /staff about students.
- Put in place a clear referral procedure to support staff in dealing with students in distress.
- In conjunction with team leader, year head, class tutor/s, class teachers and Pastoral Care Team attend to the needs of the students/class group or year group involved.
- Alert staff to vulnerable students.
- Be available to students to support them, assess their needs and refer on as necessary. A referral will involve contact with individual parents.
- As required make contact with relevant educational and community support personnel and agencies.
- Following the incident continue to monitor those affected and offer support or referral as necessary.
- Evaluate the overall effectiveness of the schools response following the incident.

## **FAMILY LIAISON**

- Following a first contact by the principal with the family, the family liaison person will co-ordinate any further contact.
- With the assistance of the chaplain and R.E. personnel they may consult the family about the involvement of the school in liturgies and funerals.
- Assist with all communication dealing with parents of any student affected by the critical incident- this may involve drawing up a letter to parents, guidelines for telephone enquires and meetings with parents.

## **COMMUNITY LIAISON**

- Network with community agencies and support groups...
- Co-ordinate community involvement in school.
- Keep records of community involvement.
- Keep an updated list and contact details of community agencies and support groups.

## **MEDIA LIAISON**

- Establish contacts with various media representatives. This will make communication easier and procedures smoother during a crisis.
- Have templates gathered of statements that could be adapted to a particular context. ( Contact DES Communications office)
- With the Critical Incident Management Team, prepare promptly a concise statement which expresses the school's reaction to the tragedy and outlines the steps in the school's response.
  - Considerations include:
    - Priority be given to the sensitivities and needs of those affected directly by the critical incident
    - The non-release of names, addresses and phone numbers
    - Rely on facts and avoid speculation
    - Consider likely questions and a response to them
- The protection of the privacy of those involved is paramount and therefore the importance of discouraging members of the school community independently communicating with the media is paramount.
- A room must be designated where reporters can gather and be addressed as a group by a school representative. It is important to ensure that the media do not have free access to the remainder of the school. Agree with the press a time for briefings if this is necessary in an ongoing situation.
- Provide assistance in drawing up the written and oral communication with staff, parents, students and other bodies.
- Co-ordinate the approach taken to telephone enquires from parents and others.

## **ADMINISTRATIVE ROLE**

- Keep an updated list of contact numbers. (Students, staff, other agencies and support groups).
- Compile emergency information pack for those taking school trips.
- Record a log of events surrounding the response.
- Allocate telephone communication base.
- Allocate rooms/areas for various groups. (Students, family members, media, outside agencies)

## **Critical incident Response Plan**

### **1. Mobilising the Critical Incident Management Team**

The first duty is to ensure that each Team member is supported and comfortable in their role for the particular critical incident. Opting out is always offered and substitution by another staff member then occurs. Roles are agreed and assigned, with the general proviso that all team members act in concert.

(See Appendix 1 "Principal's Checklist/Items for Consideration")

### **2. Establish the Facts**

It is crucial that the school has the correct information regarding the critical incident. Senior and involved staff gather together to establish the facts- this may involve contacting others such as hospitals, Garda, and family members. As well as facts the reliability and the accuracy of information should be assessed and recorded.

#### **3.1 Immediate Response**

The group will need to agree an immediate plan of action which may involve:

- a. Informing staff and students
- b. Contacting parents
- c. Visiting the home of person/s involved
- d. Organising assemblies
- e. Involving the Pastoral Care team and other relevant school personnel
- f. Alerting relevant outside agencies
- g. Liaising with those at an incident site (In case of an out of school incident)
- h. Agreeing a common statement with regard to the incident
- i. Assigning tasks within the critical incident management team

(See Appendix 2 Informing those needing information)

#### **3.2 Short-term Action**

The action that is needed in the short-term will be dependent on the nature of the critical incident. Actions may come under the following headings:

- Staff- making and communicating appropriate arrangements
- Students-informing and supporting them
- Parents/Guardians- defining the school's supportive role for parents/guardians.
- Special provisions-such as funeral services and school closure
- Checking that the Critical Incident Management Team is supported, coping and comfortable in the circumstances.

(See Appendix 3 Short Term Action)

#### **3.3 Medium and Long-term Action**

The following are merely a selection of possibilities that may be relevant given nature of the critical incident.

- Students returning to school following a critical incident cannot be easily categorised in terms of their needs. The pastoral team will be a useful resource in seeking to support each student appropriately. Care should be taken to monitor:

the relationship with peers and teachers; academic performance and work rate; involvement in extra-curricular activities.

- Consider if a special day of reflection/retreat would benefit the class/es affected by the critical incident.
- Offer a Rainbows/Spectrum programme to students.
- When a subsequent critical incident such as bereavement occurs in the school setting, take care to support those who were affected previously as this subsequent event may trigger deep emotional reactions.
- The school might consider the dedication of a tree, special garden, piece of artwork or a notice board to recall those involved in the critical incident.
- Remembrance liturgies/services might be relevant.
- The Principal and pastoral care team will benefit all in the school by constantly reviewing the needs of students, staff and parents in relation to issues of trauma.
- A regular review of curricular provision, specialist staff training and links with outside agencies in the area of change, loss, death and crisis issues is important.
- In-service for Form Teachers and staff to help them explore death, dying and grief with students.

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

- The Critical Incident Management Team led by the Principal have the primary responsibility for implementing this policy.
- The team are particularly supported in this role by the Pastoral Care Team.
- Other staff members have roles and responsibilities for implementing this policy in accordance with their assigned duties, such as Assistant Principal, Special Duties Teacher, Year Head and Class Tutor.
- Copies of The Critical Incident Response Plan will be readily available to all members of the school community.
- Each member of the Critical Incident Management Team will have a personal copy of the policy and plan. New/Temporary staff will be alerted to the Critical Incident Response Plan.

## **Success Criteria**

- When the school community is aware of policy provisions for managing the critical incident and the aftermath of the incident.
- When each person, charged with special responsibility for managing the critical incident, knows and effectively discharges their role and responsibility.
- When 'ready to go packs', emergency contact list and school trip emergency information pack are created and available.
- When the impacts of a critical incident are effectively managed to minimise adverse effects.

## **Review**

This policy will be reviewed by The Critical Incident Management Team at the end of its first year and subsequently in the light of experience and guided by expert advice.

## SCHOOL EMERGENCY CONTACT LIST

In times of critical incident it is necessary to have a list of names and numbers of key personnel and organisations. Such a list needs to be easily accessible and regularly updated.

CONTACT	NAME	NUMBER

## 'READY-TO-GO PACK' FOR EACH MEMBER OF THE CRITICAL INCIDENT TEAM

- This is an information pack for each member of the Critical Incident Management Team.
- It is collated by each member of the team.
- Each pack contains relevant materials, resources, contact names, numbers etc. relevant to the role.
- Some Examples-
  - Sample letter
  - FAQ'S
  - List of relevant contacts
  - Range of Reactions to Grief/Trauma etc.

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Principal's Checklist/Items for Consideration**

Following is a checklist of things to consider in the event of a critical incident. They are not written in order of what must come first etc. it is important for the Principal to take time to plan what he/she must do and what is appropriate to say to all concerned.(See Appendix 2 and 3)

- Take time to let the news sink in.
- Call a meeting of the Critical Incident Management Team and include Chaplain, Year Head and Tutor of student concerned.
- Put together as much factual information as possible.
- Inform staff what has happened.
- Discuss school routine for the first day with the staff.
- Identify particular students who may need to be told individually such as relatives and close friends.
- Inform students of the critical incident and explain school routine for the day and support and back-up for the students.
- Contact if necessary Local Health Board Crisis Service and /or DES Trauma Unit.
- Make contact with the family of those involved in the critical incident.
- Meet with key staff that can offer support and decide on the format for this.
- Decide on any other arrangements which need to be arranged on the first day e.g. prayers for the student and his/her family.
- Check in with the Critical Incident Management Team and staff during the day to keep abreast of what is happening throughout the day.
- Be aware of any staff members who may be particularly distressed.
- Make staff aware of students who are particularly distressed and need support.
- Encourage staff to communicate with each other and you throughout the day to let you know how things are going.
- Find out arrangements of funeral etc and communicate this to staff and students.
- If there is a likelihood of interest from the media discuss a strategy with the Critical Incident Management Team and deal with any such requests. (See Appendix 2)
- At the end of the first day review events with the Critical Incident Management Team and school staff and make plans for the following day.

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **3.1 Immediate Response- Informing those needing information**

It is vital that all those needing information receive it as soon as is practicable. A common statement is agreed. Attempt to alert and inform staff in the first instance. If at all possible the students should be told at the same time in no larger than normal class size groups.

The statement should seek to:

- a. Be communicated in a sensitive manner
- b. Give the facts as they are known
- c. Highlight the supports that will be available
- d. Indicate the actions that are planned

In the case where the incident has occurred out of school, a similar statement is needed to assist those who will be telephoning relatives. It is preferable to have a group of people involved so that all concerned are informed in or around the same time. Some further considerations in contacting relatives may include:

- Offer any practical help needed-transport, phone numbers, contact names
- Enquire if the relative is alone or has someone to offer support
- Carefully review with the relative that the information given has been fully understood
- Alerting all other involved families to the incident will help them when they subsequently make contact with their child.

**Liaising with the press:** If there are to be enquires from the press, it is important that the school cater for this by nominating one person only to act as a liaison.

**Others to be informed:** When possible, inform the chairperson of the Board of Management and decide whether an emergency meeting of the Board is necessary. Consider when, if appropriate to inform the schools insurance company and other concerned bodies and agencies.

## **APPENDIX 3**

### **3.2 Short-term Action**

The action that is needed in the short-term will be dependent on the nature of the critical incident. Actions may come under the following headings:

- Students
- Staff
- Parents/Guardians
- Funeral Services

#### **STAFF**

Many staff, following a critical incident may need to air their feelings and reactions. It may be helpful to consider a number of possibilities such as: staff meeting, inviting professional help, a staff ritual or prayer service, a simple confidential questionnaire to determine the needs of the staff.

- Care needs to be taken of those staff directly involved with the critical incident that they receive support, are not overlooked, and have time to de-brief.
- Staff who feel, for whatever reason that they are unable to be involved in the school's direct response to the critical incident should be able to opt out.
- Staff who have any concerns about students or others in relation to the incident should have easy access to personnel who can assist them.
- The Principal and the Critical Incident Management Team need to ensure they are facilitated, resourced and supported in their task as the weight of the responsibility surrounding a critical incident may be enormous. They need regular meeting to review progress and de-brief. They need to take care of their own well-being and seek whatever support is appropriate within and outside the school community.

#### **STUDENTS:**

The Principal should inform the student body at the earliest possible opportunity. The class or classes most affected should be spoken to first. A reasonable amount of time should be spent with the students to allow them to react to the news. The Principal should be accompanied with other staff members who will remain with the class. In addressing the class, the Principal should explain the routine of the day and the following days and the support services which will be in place for them.

- Efforts should be made to sustain an atmosphere where it is "okay" to talk about the experience. All staff that are available and willing should be asked to lend a hand. Care should be taken to balance the need to continue with the normal routine and the accessibility of support personnel for students.
- Constant reminders will need to be given in relation to the supports that are available. Students will react in different ways and at different times.
- Students not directly involved should also be monitored as some may be affected.
- The most essential quality in adults needed by students is that of listening. The school needs to put in place a support system for students in this regard. Again this will involve those staff that are willing and able to offer support, outside professionals where required, time and resources to carry out the role, a method of supporting each other and a review of their effectiveness.

- Freedom to be upset is important for anyone responding to a trauma.
- Students need to be asked their 'permission' regarding discussing their feelings and reactions to a crisis.
- School friends can be a good source of support. Sometimes a student may not wish to speak to an adult and may rely heavily on friends. These friends may need support as the attempt to find ways to be of help.
- Contact with home is encouraged in the initial stages. Parents need to be able to contact the school if they have information that will help the school care for their child.
- The involvement of the students in any funeral or other services needs to be discussed. The families involved need to be consulted, the students invited to take part, time given to prepare for this preparation and finally a debriefing of those concerned. At all times the rights to privacy of all those concerned must be respected.
- The students may wish to organise some form of service or ritual within the confines of the school. They should be consulted as to the nature of the ritual or service.

### **PARENTS/GUARDIANS**

The school will have some role to play in supporting parents/guardians and family members concerned with the critical incident. This will vary depending on the nature of the critical incident and the resources available to the school.

- The school should nominate contact people for parents/guardians to liaise with, particularly in regard to monitoring the progress of their children.
- Put parents/guardians in contact with each other if it is appropriate.
- Discuss with involved parents/guardians and/or Parent's Council what action could be taken to support those concerned.
- If appropriate involve parents/guardians in a school liturgy or service.

### **FUNERAL SERVICES**

Consult the family members concerned and decide what form of school representation and involvement is appropriate.

- Prepare students ahead of the funeral. For some this may be the first occasion they have been exposed to a major trauma or grief. Take time after the event to debrief students.
- Check out with the funeral directors the arrangement concerning floral tributes.
- A common expression of sympathy from school/students/ staff may be appropriate. Encourage and assist if necessary students who wish to write a personal message of sympathy.
- If possible, representatives of the school should visit the home of those affected. If students request to visit the home, check that this is appropriate. They may need support doing this.