

Student Mental Health

Background

Educators are continuing to recognize the impact that a student's mental health has on learning and achievement, as well as the importance of understanding a student's home- and school-life. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) subscribes to this more highly accepted concept; specifically, mentally healthy children are more successful and that a focus on student mental health supports the mission of schools: learning.

Scenario

Late in the school year, tragedy struck a Connecticut High School when a student, a gay 17-year-old male athlete, committed suicide at his home. The student was beloved by many in the school community, as he had been in the district since moving to Connecticut in the first grade and was well-known. The student had mostly maintained grades of As and Bs, until his grades began to decline into the high-D to mid-C range in the second half of his senior year. The student had never been disciplined in his high school career. The student was a former member of the school track and field team, staying on the team between freshman year, until he quit the team in the middle of his senior season. He stated that his father lost his job, and therefore, needed to get a job to help his family which prevented him from spending time participating in extracurricular school activities. The student had previously been in a long-term relationship with another boy, who moved out-of-state at the conclusion of their junior year. This relationship ended near the end of the fall semester, as friends of the student cited difficulties in the long-distance relationship. Staff was made aware of this by the student and the student's friends before the incident.

During the summer following the student's death, the student's parents filed a notice of intent to sue the district and the high school. The parents alleged negligence by the school, the district, and school staff. The suit alleged deficiencies in the district's Suicide Prevention Program caused the school to not identify the student as at risk through the district's Suicide Prevention Policy, failure to train staff on the warning signs of suicide, and failure to protect the student.

Liability Assessment

The investigation found that there were several precipitating events and actions of which staff was made aware before April (listed below).

The district has a policy for Youth Suicide Prevention and Youth Suicide Attempts, in accordance with Connecticut General Statutes (CGS) Section 10-221. In this policy, the school contains a list of possible risk factors for suicide. Discovery found that the following factors were explicitly mentioned in the district's Suicide Prevention Policy as possible suicide risk factors, and staff was aware that these factors were present in the student prior to the incident date:

- **Periods of unusual family stress**
 - *Student's father had been recently laid off from his job*
- **Loss of significant relationship**
 - *Breaking up with his boyfriend of four years*
- **History of alcoholism in immediate family**
 - *Student's father suffered from alcoholism and was receiving treatment*
- **Sexuality conflicts**
 - *Student was part of the gay community, which has a higher-rate of suicide than heterosexual youths*
- **Academic problems**
 - *Student's grades were declining throughout his senior year*
- **Fear of major change in life**
 - *Impending graduation*

Furthermore, during the student's senior year, he began writing in essays and homework assignments increasingly vague and disturbing texts. In one instance, the student wrote the following in a personal essay in his creative writing class,

"I have many flaws that will eventually be the end of me. The tragedy that might be the end of me, like selfishness or other things like that. Riding around being selfish and not thinking of others. I'm scared for myself that I might do something actually harmful for others. I really messed up. There's no way I'm gonna finish."

Liability Assessment - *continued*

The student received a high grade on the assignment, with the teacher's comment stating that the student "really captured the essence of" his character. The teacher who graded the assignment, when asked about possible warning signs of suicide and the district's policy, stated that she did not take this as a warning sign and that she was "relatively unfamiliar" with the district's policy. The student's parents were unaware of this assignment.

The district defended its efforts by providing training records that satisfy CGS 10-220a(a) and curriculum records that satisfy CGS 10-16b.

Following months of discovery, the school district settled the lawsuit out of court with a No Admission of Fault or Liability clause for **\$525,000**.

- Continue to educate staff (**CGS 10-220a(a)**) and students (**CGS 10-16b**) on the prevention of and response to youth suicide. Training can include:
 - Possible warning signs and red flag indicators of thoughts of suicide, *and*
 - The district's Suicide Prevention Policy;
- Consider establishing a Student Assistance Program aimed at identifying at-risk students and communicating possible treatment methods;
- Due to the fact that adolescents are vulnerable to suicide contagion, consider the following immediately after an incident:
 - Notify the school community in an appropriate manner with respect to the family and friends of the deceased student. It may be appropriate to notify staff and immediate friends of the deceased first,
 - Offer emotional assistance to staff and students as soon as possible,
 - Allow the school community time to process the information and the opportunity grieve and talk about their emotions,
 - Utilize the "*After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools - 2nd Edition*" document, or contact the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) for further assistance.

For more information on this topic, please contact your CIRMA Risk Management Consultant. Visit our training schedule at CIRMA.org for a list of current training programs.