

## **School Planning for the September 11th Anniversary**

### **Why is it Important to Plan for the Anniversary of 9/11?**

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 awakened our country to enormous tragedy and put the nation on heightened alert to possible future danger. During the day of remembrance and civic participation, the anniversary may serve as a reminder of the horrific events of last September, renewing concerns about safety, danger and fears of recurrence. It may also evoke a range of personal feelings of loss.

The anniversary will be understood in many different ways by children, families and school communities across the country, therefore, a school's anniversary plan should be responsive to the unique experience and needs of the members of its particular school community. Some schools may decide to have extensive memorial activities, while others may choose to have a simple moment of silence or maintain normal school routine.

The following information is designed to help school communities make thoughtful preparations for the school week of the anniversary. It provides suggestions about two major dimensions of the anniversary period:

- Plans to help with potential renewal of fears and concerns over safety and protection;
- Plans regarding memorial services and constructive community-building activities.

### **When do we start this planning?**

From the many schools that have faced tragic events, we have learned that it is important for the school administration to meet with staff and teachers to discuss varying views and options for activities regarding the week of the anniversary. To the extent possible, time should be dedicated at the very beginning of the school year for discussion in order to build consensus over several issues. These include how students and parents will be involved in the planning process, and whether there will be coordination with community partners. It is important for both students and parents to receive information about any events planned by the school with enough time to respond with questions and comments before the events take place.

## **SAFETY AND PROTECTION**

### **Why focus first on issues of safety, protection and prevention?**

Students and staff may experience heightened fear and concerns about their personal safety during the anniversary period. Students may even have hesitations about attending school during that week. It is therefore important to first address issues of safety. From a foundation of security and protection, children and youth can more fully participate in memorialization and constructive efforts to improve their schools, community and nation. A review of the school's safe school and/or disaster plan can be a first positive step toward providing the necessary reassurance to students, staff, and families.

### **What are important issues to review in the safe school and/or disaster plans?**

The one-year anniversary of September 11<sup>th</sup> provides an excellent opportunity for school administrators and teachers to review safe school and/or disaster plans, summarizing progress and developing a strategic plan for the upcoming school year. It is important to review plans to address potential crises and likely types of disasters specific to the community, as well as evacuation and student/family re-unification plans. The school administration should inform the school community, parents and community partners about this review process in order to provide a meaningful sense of readiness and preparedness for the year ahead. These steps will promote a sense of competence and confidence that will benefit students and parents who may take their lead from school personnel. Attention to these basic safety and disaster plans is an important first step to provide constructive reassurance to the entire school community.

### **What do we do about increased fears and worries during this anniversary period?**

Whenever something terrifying and tragic has happened, the anniversary will serve as a strong reminder, renewing earlier reactions and feelings, and increasing worries about something similar happening again. Schools need to have plans to help the school community with these "fears of recurrence." One can expect that, as the anniversary approaches, there will be increased media attention, warnings, rumors, myths and misconceptions that can easily add to these worries.

It is important for the school administration to set up a threat assessment and management plan to respond to potential threats or harmful rumors. A clear procedure needs to be in place so that the school may act in a timely and appropriate manner. This plan should include provisions to:

- Gather information from teachers, other school personnel, student government and peer support groups, parents, and community partners;
- Monitor media coverage and programming;
- Evaluate threat information and rumors;
- Formulate a constructive response that may include involvement of law enforcement personnel when the threat is credible;
- Set up an effective communication system that allays misplaced or exaggerated fears.

If a school is located in an area where there are specific terrorist concerns, for example, near a nuclear power plant, additional safety information may be helpful. For example, it may be very useful to engage an appropriate and knowledgeable spokesperson to address the school about current plans for safety and protection, including special measures around the anniversary. In addition, if the school community has previously suffered its own tragic or violent event, there may be fears of recurrence associated with that experience that are also renewed and, in a similar way, need to be systematically addressed.

### **Helping Students Cope with Fear**

Fears and worries associated with the anniversary will differ depending on developmental maturity, and individual, family, community and cultural experiences.

Young children often bring their fears closer to home. For example, after the Challenger tragedy, some young children worried about an explosion happening at home that would endanger them and their families. They need repeated clarifying information and attention to preserving the stability of their daily routine and care taking.

School-aged children can demonstrate very specific new fears and avoidant behavior related to what they now perceive as risky situations. Four months after 9/11, the New York Board of Education discovered in their psychological needs assessment that these fears were common in this age group across a broad geographical area. School-aged children will benefit from added support and supervision in school, at home and in their community.

Adolescents may propagate rumors and manufacture prophecies of impending danger or threat that are shared among their peer group. For example, within the first week after 9/11, teenagers had spread supposed writings of Nostradamus over the Internet that predicted the events of 9/11. It was weeks until the writings were exposed as fraudulent, but by then many adolescents across the United States had fueled their fears and morbid expectations.

Adolescents can also respond with more reckless behavior. Schools may consider stepping up their use of risk prevention and peer support programs, and reinforce with students and parents the importance of safe behavior during this anniversary period.

### **How do we cope with false alarms?**

School safety and disaster plans provide school procedures to deal with real threats or emergencies. However, around anniversaries of tragic events, many schools have experienced “false alarms,” for example, bomb threats, that activate emergency procedures. Even after the threat is declared over, fear reactions among students and staff may continue for some time.

While returning to classroom activities, it is important to provide a calming down period, recognizing that students can be agitated, unduly anxious, withdrawn or even aggressive. Clarifying information regarding the false alarm should be shared with staff and students as soon as possible, and communicated appropriately to parents. School collaboration with law enforcement may be needed to properly identify the source and prevent its repetition. School safety plans need to include procedures to minimize the disturbing impact on the school community.

### **Should students attend school during the anniversary period?**

Students will benefit from the presence and support of their teachers and friends, and normal school routines. Conversely, they may be placed at risk if they are left in unstructured settings without adult supervision. To maximize student attendance during the week of the anniversary, principals may want to send letters home apprising families of the anniversary preparations and encouraging student participation in activities that may be planned for that week.

### **Are there children and youth who may require special support at this time?**

There are many different groups of children and youth who may require special support during this anniversary period. Schools that were located in areas most impacted by the terrorist attacks have been developing programs to address the special needs of children and youth who directly experienced the horror, life threat, and dislocation. As learned from the Oklahoma City Public School District and the New York Board of Education, the radius of personal impact and loss extends across whole regions, even nation-wide. Therefore, schools that are geographically distant from New York or Washington, D.C. may have groups of students for whom this anniversary carries very personal meaning. The following highlights groups of students who may need special attention and how schools can support these students:

- Students may have had extended family members or close family friends who died, were injured or escaped the terrorist attacks, or who participated in the rescue and relief operations;

- Students whose parents are in “high risk” professions may have added concerns during the anniversary week (e.g. fire and police personnel, members of the military and airline employees);
- Students with family members who are traveling that week may also have increased worries or concerns.

These students may benefit from:

- Outreach that may be as simple as a discrete supportive contact from a school counselor, teacher or staff member;
  - Opportunities for checking in about how they are doing.
- Many students may have a history of trauma, violence or sudden loss. The events of 9/11 may serve as a strong reminder of their personal traumas and tragedies.
    - As many schools and counseling programs have found, these students may require acknowledgement of their own personal tragedies and access to additional support and counseling.
  - Students who tend to be anxious may have special difficulty at this time. They may be more reactive to “threat information,” be susceptible to rumors and misconceptions, and have a harder time being reassured.
    - They may require more frequent supportive contacts and benefit from more repeated clarifications regarding their worries and concerns.
  - Students with physical and developmental disabilities may also require additional attention. Any consideration of danger can increase the sense of vulnerability among students with disabilities.
    - Schools should offer brief explanations of current safety procedures to students and parents, and be prepared to answer any questions they may have about safety and disaster plans that address these unique needs.
  - Students may have concerns about issues of discrimination and intolerance. Many schools have instituted additional curricula to enhance understanding among students of different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds.
    - It will be helpful to revisit these materials during the anniversary period and to reinforce safe school programs that monitor and address intolerant behavior.

**Are there ways to communicate information about students who may need special support during the anniversary period?**

In teacher/faculty meetings held before students return to school, it will be helpful to review these categories of students and to share information about specific students for

whom there is concern. Encourage parents to share any concerns they may have about their children during this period of time, including if there has been trauma and loss over the summer.

## **COMMEMORATION AND BUILDING TOWARD THE FUTURE**

School decisions about the commemoration of the anniversary should include two complimentary components.

- Decisions about memorial activities (see accompanying specific guidelines) should be partnered with plans that are forward looking, that are, designed to engage students in constructive ways to help better their school community in the upcoming year.

### **Why is a commemoration activity important?**

An acknowledgement however circumscribed or extended, of the national significance of this anniversary is an important step in the transition to focusing on how to build a healthy and safe school community for the upcoming year. Many of the communities in the most affected areas of our country have spent several months reaching consensus to conduct simple and dignified memorial activities. Schools may wish to learn more about these activities in order to select an activity that joins the school in a sense of unity with school communities across our nation. For example, schools could choose to use the symbol of a rose or the reading of the Gettysburg Address that will be part of the memorial services planned in New York City. One goal of this activity is to renew the positive feelings generated among children and youth over the year since 9/11.

### **What are the positive feelings that were engendered after 9/11?**

In “The State of Our Nation’s Youth,” the Horatio Alger Association recently reported that September 11<sup>th</sup> brought about a significant commitment by a majority of students to build a friendlier and more considerate school climate. Even a well-planned brief commemorative moment at school can renew and extend students’ commitment to these values through the upcoming school year.

### **How do we build on this positive constructive response to 9/11?**

We have learned over many years that children and youth cope better with feelings generated by a memorial when any discussion or event, whether in the classroom, in extracurricular settings or in an assembly, concludes with positive constructive activities. One of the best ways for children and youth to manage their sense of helplessness, vulnerability, anger or sorrow is to be provided an opportunity to make a positive difference in their daily lives and the life of their school community. The anniversary period provides a special window of opportunity to bolster student and

school investment in good citizenship, peer support and leadership, and community service programs.

**What is the role of tolerance in the course of recovery from tragedy and loss?**

In school communities where there has been catastrophic violence, disaster or tragic accident, the greatest challenge over time is to generate a school climate where groups that were most affected and those least affected can be respectful and tolerant of their very different courses of recovery. The September 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary provides an opportunity to include this important dimension of tolerance into schools' efforts to develop pro-social skills, positive human relations and an appreciation and respect for diversity. In every school, there are children recovering from tragedies and losses. An important means of honoring the memory of September 11<sup>th</sup> is for schools to create a climate that supports sensitivity to the special, often extended needs of these children while respecting the readiness of other students to continue school routines as usual.