



## School Social Work Association of America Resolution Statement

### **BEST PRACTICES IN SUPPORTING AND ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS WHO EXPERIENCE GRIEF**

The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) is proud to be part of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students. The coalition is a unique collaboration among the leading professional organizations representing educators and Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP) (including school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, school social workers, and other student support personnel), who have come together with a shared belief: grieving students need the support and care of the entire school community. The Coalition's purpose is to create and share a set of professionally-endorsed resources that will empower school communities across America to support their grieving students (CSGS, n.d.). SSWAA endorses these resources and the accompanying training modules as best practices in addressing grief in schools and communities. We encourage school social workers and other school personnel to share these resources with parents and classroom teachers in supporting students throughout the grieving process.

Childhood bereavement is common: one in every seven Americans loses a sibling or parent before turning 20, and nine out of ten children experience the death of a family member or friend by the time they complete high school (New York Life Foundation, 2011). Yet grieving children are vastly overlooked by society at large and schools in particular. Schools have a critical role in the grief journey of children. Teachers' and classmates' response to a student's loss can serve as a source of support and stability during this difficult time. Grief can seriously impact learning, manifesting itself in decreased academic performance, social withdrawal, and behavioral problems (Hart & Garza, 2013; Jenkins, Wang & Turner, 2014; National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, n.d.; Quinn-Lee, 2014).

The challenges of addressing a student's grief may become uncomfortable for school personnel who are not adequately trained to provide an appropriate response. Often, school personnel believe a hands-off approach is better and may not recognize the need for their involvement. As a result, some schools do less in the interest of "giving the family privacy." However, students need to know they have a social network in school to support them, including both caring friends as well as adults with whom they can share and help process their grief (National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, n.d.).

It is vitally important to recognize the powerful effects of grief on a student's social, emotional, and academic well-being. It is critical to give the student time and space to process grief and to provide additional supports for students who need more assistance in working through their response to loss.

School social workers often take the lead in coordinating the school's grief response, which includes working collaboratively with administrators and other school personnel. School social workers are the vital link between the school, home, and community. In that role, school social workers also provide a "whole child" perspective and are often familiar with issues the student may be experiencing at home and in the community that may also impact their response to loss. Students

experiencing losses or mental health issues may need more direct support at school and may also need referrals to community mental health providers. Since school social workers work closely with families and community service providers, they are also involved in facilitating acceptance of and access to those services.

By demonstrating support, educators have an enormous opportunity to improve outcomes for their students. Unfortunately, the vast majority of school personnel have not been trained to address grief and loss issues. In a 2012 survey on grief at school conducted by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), seven in ten teachers reported having at least one grieving student currently in their classrooms – yet only 7 percent reported having had any amount of bereavement training (AFT, 2012). Typically, teachers lack the knowledge to support grieving students. They need professional development to recognize the serious impact of reminders and anniversaries of loss that can be experienced by the student (Quinn-Lee, 2014).

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students has developed resources broadly approved by leading professional organizations to guide educators and other school personnel in supporting and caring for their grieving students. The practitioner-oriented website – [grievingstudents.org](http://grievingstudents.org) – provides practical, accessible information for teachers, administrators, school mental health professionals, and other school personnel. This user-friendly, interdisciplinary site enables educators to learn about the issue of childhood grief.

The Coalition's materials emphasize the importance of interventions throughout the school environment. The materials offer examples of what can be done to comfort children and offer opportunities for the safe expression of grief. The handouts also provide information to support family members and caregivers who are also suffering from grief and need to know the best way to address their child's needs.

SSWAA is proud to contribute to developing best practices for our members and the education community. SSWAA hopes its members will utilize these materials and the opportunity to be a stronger advocate for grieving students.

*The Coalition for Grieving Students works in partnership with the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, led by pediatrician and childhood bereavement expert Dr. David Schonfeld. The work of this group is underwritten by the New York Life Foundation, a pioneering advocate for the cause of childhood bereavement.*

## References

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