How Schools Can Help Prevent Suicide\*

A comprehensive school-based suicide prevention program should be based on a number of complementary, multifactored strategies tailored to the cultural needs of the community. Districts should not attempt to implement all strategies at once; however, strategies should be built on a foundation that responds to the most serious issues faced by students and the school – a student at high risk of suicide and a death by suicide of a student (which could put other students at risk).

Key components of a strategic approach to school-based suicide prevention (SAMHSA toolkit chapter 1):

1. Protocols for helping students at risk of suicide
2. Protocols for responding to a suicide death
3. Staff education and training
4. Parent education and training
5. Student Education
6. Screening

Two essential components that every school should have in place are: 1. Protocols for helping students at possible risk of suicide and 2. Protocols for responding to a suicide death (and thus preventing additional suicides.

\*\*Every school should have these 2 sets of protocols in place regardless of whether

they are going to implement an additional suicide prevention activities\*\*

After schools develop these two essential protocols, all staff should be engaged in suicide prevention, including,

* + Educating all staff about the importance of suicide prevention
  + Training all staff to recognize suicide risk
  + Training selected staff to assess and refer students at risk of suicide to appropriate services

After a school has created and implemented the above components (the two essential protocols and the staff education and training), it is ready to implement additional suicide prevention strategies, including:

* + Educating parents about behavioral health promotion and suicide risk
  + Educating and involving students in behavioral health promotion and suicide prevention
  + Screening students for suicide risk

STEPS FOR GETTING STARTED:

What are the most critical steps you should take to protect your students from suicide?

How can you engage administrators in suicide prevention?

Which school staff and community partners should be involved from the beginning?

How can you educate yourself and the school community about suicide prevention?

What are the implications of race, ethnicity, culture and language on suicide prevention among Black, Indigenous and other minoritized youth?

1. **Engage** administrators, school boards, and other key partners
2. **Identify** district/building level team, parents, and community members (research state, county, district level data) and bring people together to start the planning process
3. **Share** information about youth suicide and suicide prevention with stakeholders
4. **Assess** your current policies, health/SEL curriculum, school culture
5. **Develop** your overall strategy and suicide prevention activities

KEY COMPONENTS:

1. **Steps to develop protocols to help students at risk (SAMHSA toolkit chapter 2) (also see Model School District Policy on Suicide Prevention: Model Language, Commentary, and Resources)**

Step 1: Convene a group to create protocols for helping students at risk of suicide.

Step 2: Identify the suicide risk response coordinator

Step 3: Identify and involve mental health service providers to whom students can be referred.

Step 4: Develop a protocol to help students at risk for suicide.

The protocol should include provisions for:

Assessing suicide risk

Notifying parents

Referring to a mental health service provider

Documenting the process

Step 5: Develop a protocol for responding to a suicide attempt in the school or on the school campus.

Step 6: Plan for managing a student’s return to school.

Step 7: Help staff understand the protocols.

1. Steps to develop protocols for responding to a suicide (SAMHSA toolkit chapter 3) (also see After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools Second Edition)

Step 1: Convene a group to create the protocols.

Step 2: Identify community partners who can help.

Step 3: Create a protocol for your school’s immediate response to a suicide.

Before beginning the process of creating a protocol for your school, first investigate what is already in place:

* Are there any State, district, Bureau of Indian Education, or tribal protocols or procedures to which your protocol and activities must conform?
* If so, are they recommended or mandated, and how appropriate are they for the needs of your school?
* Does your school have a crisis response plan, and if so, does the plan include procedures for responding to a suicide?

Step 4: Include the Immediate Response Protocol in your school’s crisis response plan.

Step 5: Create a protocol for the long-term response to a suicide.

The suicide of a member of the school community, especially of a student, has consequences that will continue long after the event. You should also create a protocol that describes actions to take in the weeks, months, and years after a suicide. These actions include:

* Appropriately memorializing the deceased in the yearbook and at graduation
* Preparing for the anniversary of the death or the birthday of the deceased in ways that do not increase the likelihood of creating suicide contagion

Step 6: Help staff understand the protocols.

Step 7: Update the protocols.

1. **Steps for choosing and implementing suicide prevention education and training for staff (SAMHSA toolkit chapter 4)**

Step 1: Convene a group to assess your staff’s education and training needs.

Step 2: Provide all staff with information and awareness about suicide and the school’s role in suicide prevention.

Step 3. Train staff to identify suicide risk factors and warning signs among students and to take appropriate action.

Step 4. Train selected mental health staff to assess suicide risk in individual students.

1. **Steps for developing suicide prevention education and outreach for parents (SAMHSA toolkit chapter 5)**

Step 1: Convene a group to plan and implement parent education and outreach activities.

Step 2: Select or develop parent education and outreach programs.

Step 3: Identify ways to increase participation among parents at events and activities.

* Give parents what they need
* Accommodate language, culture, religion, and economic status
* Do not use the word “suicide” in the title of the event
* Go to parents. Don’t expect parents to come to you
* Clarify privacy issues

Step 4: Integrate parent education into existing programs.

1. **Steps to develop or select student programs (SAMHSA toolkit chapter 6)**

Student programs that address suicide can play a significant role in reducing risk for suicide when they are used in conjunction with other strategies, such as protocols and staff training. There are three types of student programs, each with different objectives. They are as follows:

Curricula for all students

» Provide information about suicide prevention

» Promote positive attitudes

» Increase students’ ability to recognize if they or their peers are at risk for suicide

» Encourage students to seek help for themselves or their peers

Skill-building programs for at-risk students

» Help protect at-risk students from suicide by building their coping, problem- solving, and cognitive skills

» Address problems that can lead to suicide, such as depression and other mental health issues, anger, and drug use

Peer leader programs

» Teach selected students skills needed to help students at risk

» Empower selected students so that they can take action to improve the school environment

Step 1: Convene a group to plan and implement student programs.

Step 2: Determine which type(s) of student program(s) will fit the needs of your school.

Step 3: Choose or develop the specific program(s) you want to implement at your school.

Choose the specific program(s) that meet the needs of your students and school and that fit with the resources you have available. Be sure to take into consideration the cultural backgrounds of your students. Keep in mind that every suicide prevention strategy or program has its own strengths and limitations.

Step 4: Adapt student programs for your school community.

Student programs sometimes need to be adapted for a school’s students. There may be cultural differences in how students display the warning signs of suicide and in their attitudes about suicide, as well as in how they feel about sharing personal information, speaking with adults, or seeking help. Note that any adaptation made for cultural reasons should take into account the diverse cultures of all students within the school or district and should not rely on stereotypes or overly broad generalizations about a culture.

***A major concern with adapting an evidence-based program is maintaining its integrity so that the positive outcomes will still be attained. If you think a program might need to be adapted for your school, you should explore the issue of adaptation before choosing a program.***

Step 5: Integrate suicide prevention programs into other initiatives to improve behavioral health.

1. **Steps to plan and implement a screening program (SAMHSA toolkit chapter 7)**

Step 1: Convene a group to plan and conduct a screening program.

Step 2: Secure support from administrators and staff for a screening program.

Step 3: Determine which community mental health providers to use for referrals.

Screening is likely to increase the number of students your school identifies as needing to see mental health providers.

* Decide which ones would be good referrals for students who are at risk for suicide
* Determine whether you need to expand your network of providers to ensure that high-risk students receive a follow-up evaluation and treatment as soon as possible

Step 4: Select a screening program to use for the students at your school.

It is important to base your selection of a screening program on information about how well programs may meet the needs of your students and school, including diversity in the students’ cultural backgrounds. It can be very helpful to learn about other schools’ experiences with implementing screening programs.

Step 5: Engage parents in the screening program.

It is essential to determine whether there are any State, school district, tribal, Bureau of Indian Education, or program funder requirements about obtaining parental consent in order for your school to conduct a screening program. \*If there are, find out whether the consent must be active or may be passive.

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, & Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (2018). *After a suicide: A toolkit for*

*schools* (2nd ed.). Waltham, MA: Education Development Center.

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, American School Counselor Association, National Association of School Psychologists**,** & The Trevor Project. *Model School District Policy on Suicide Prevention: Model Language, Commentary, and Resource* (2nd ed.).

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools*. HHS Publication No. SMA-12-4669. Rockville, MD: Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012.