



# *St. Mary's Secondary School*

*Convent of Mercy, Newport, Co. Tipperary V94 RY18*



Telephone 061-378344 Fax 061-378358

[www.stmarysnewport.com](http://www.stmarysnewport.com)

Registered Charity Number: 20148379

## **Critical Incident Policy**

St. Mary's Secondary School, Newport, is a Voluntary Catholic Secondary School under the Trusteeship and the Patronage of C.E.I ST. (Catholic Schools, An Irish Schools Trust). The School is grant aided by the Department of Education & Skills, and is a co-educational school.

**School Management:** The Board of Management of St. Mary's Secondary School is a statutory Board, appointed pursuant to the provisions of the Education Act 1998.

### **Mission Statement:**

St. Mary's Secondary School, Newport operates as a Catholic co-educational Secondary School, to provide teaching and learning of the highest quality for the benefit of the community which it serves.

### **In pursuing this mission we aim:**

- To provide a quality educational experience that caters for the full range of academic aptitude and abilities.
- To foster the intellectual, physical, social, cultural, moral and religious development of our students.
- To enable pupils to achieve their full potential academically.
- To promote the Catholic ethos and faith.
- To cater for the needs of the local community in so far as ethos, resources and facilities permit.

**Ethos:** As a CEIST school, St. Mary's seeks to promote the five key elements of the CEIST charter.

Promoting Spiritual and Human Development.

Achieving Quality in Teaching and Learning.

Showing Respect for Every Person.

Creating Community.

Being Just and Responsible.

### **Definition of a Critical Incident**

A critical incident is any incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school and disrupts the running of the school.

Examples of a critical incident might be:

- The death of a member/members of the school community through accident, illness or suicide.
- A serious accident or tragedy in the school community
- A serious accident or tragedy in the wider community
- Serious damage to the school through fire, flooding, vandalism etc.
- The disappearance of a member of the school community
- A physical attack on a staff member or student
- An Intrusion into the school.

### **The Role of the School**

The school can offer security at a time of insecurity. It is within such a normal environment that students and staff can best be helped to deal with traumatic reactions to critical incidents. Most incidents require a multi-dimensional approach, involving all aspects of the community. If teachers, students and parents receive support and information (within the bounds of GDPR legislation), they can become important agents of recovery, dispelling rumours and encouraging coping throughout the community. It is recognised that the first 48 hours are crucial, and that the first three weeks following a critical incident is a time of particular vulnerability for staff and students.

### **Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT)**

Purpose:

- By identifying key roles in advance, there is clarity about who will do what, when and how
- No one person should be overburdened
- Staff may need to be supported
- Nothing is forgotten or left to chance.

## **Members:**

Principal: Kevin Cusack.

Deputy principal: Danny O Callaghan

Guidance Counsellor: Jennifer Buckley

Special Needs Coordinator: Audrey O Rourke,

AP1 Post Holders

(Or their replacement, in cases of absence)

## **Aim**

The St. Mary's Secondary School community will need support in the event of a tragedy. When such a tragedy happens, it is essential that the effects of it are not ignored. The aim of the critical incident policy is to best facilitate the management of such an incident. It is vital that the principal and staff are given support to manage the crisis at school level. Once this is achieved, staff can seek to re-establish control and confidence, which can then be passed onto students. It is vital to prevent or minimise a mass hysterical grief reaction. The wellbeing of all members of our school community is paramount.

## **Action Plan**

While each school's response to a critical incident is dependent on the individual school context, many of the actions herein are based on best practice, as detailed in the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) document, *Responding to Critical Incidents, NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools (DES, 2016)*.

Relevant sections of this document are referenced throughout this policy, for example Section 11, R21.

## **Immediate / Short Term Actions.**

### **1. INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF THE INCIDENT**

#### **Step 1: What type of response is needed?**

- Response Level 1: the death of a student or staff member who was terminally ill; the death of parent/guardian/sibling; a fire in school not resulting in serious injury; serious damage to school property.
- Response Level 2: the sudden death of a student or staff member.
- Response Level 3: an accident/event involving a number of students; a violent death; an incident with a high media profile or involving a number of schools.

## **Step 2: Should a psychologist be involved?**

- Consider the nature of the event and how our school is coping. What support is needed from NEPS and/or other agencies?

## **Step 3: How does the CIMT assess the needs of the school?**

- Is there a feeling of being overwhelmed by this event?
- Has there been a previous incident? How recent? What kind of incident? If more than one, how many? (If the school has experienced a recent incident, or a number of incidents, staff may be exhausted or distressed. On the other hand, they may feel more experienced and better able to deal with the situation).
- Is there a critical incident plan/team in place?
- Is there a good pastoral care system in the school?
- Is there significant media interest in the incident?
- Are other agencies already involved?

## **Step 4: What action does the CIMT take?**

- For an incident requiring a Level 1 response it may be sufficient to talk to the psychologist on the phone.
- Refer to *Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools (2016)*. The psychologist will refer to these and talk you through relevant sections. A copy of these has been made available to all schools. It is also available on [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie) by following the links to NEPS.
- In the case of an incident requiring a level 2 or level 3 response, make contact with NEPS. Depending on the incident at least one psychologist will visit the school.

## **2. INITIAL ACTION PLAN**

- Gather accurate information - rumours add to distress
- Establish the facts - what, when, how, number and names of children/staff involved, the extent of the injuries, the location of the injured
- Contact appropriate agencies - Emergency services (See Appendix 6 in Critical Incident folder in Principal's office)
- Convene a meeting with CIMT. In the absence of the Principal, the Deputy Principal will call the meeting.
- Meet with wider staff group
- The school may need to contact parents.
- Gardaí should NOT interview students on school premises
- Management should strive to maintain a normal routine if at all possible. However, the option of school closure must be considered.
- Record and log all steps taken by the CIMT in dealing with the incident
- Appraise the Board of Management of the details of the incident.
- See Appendix 5 for list of short term tasks.

## **3. MEETING WITH STAFF GROUP**

- Teachers need accurate facts, and need to be kept updated
- It may be necessary to see staff in two separate groups so that students can be supervised
- Identify vulnerable staff members
- It may be helpful to meet again briefly at the end of the day
- Agree with staff how students are going to be told (agreed Memo/Statement)
- Relatives need to be told separately.

(List of contact details for all staff is Appendix 7 in Critical Incident folder located in principal's office.)

## **4. STUDENTS**

- It is best to keep students on school premises
- Identify closest friends first, before announcements.
- Let them talk in natural groupings, under teacher supervision.
- Give them up to date information

- Assure them that life goes on. Every effort will be made by the school and support personnel to reassure and support students as they deal with the crisis at hand.

#### **4. VULNERABLE CHILDREN**

In an incidence of death or other emotional trauma, the school community will endeavour to be particularly mindful of the following:

- Close friends or relatives of the deceased
- Children who have been bereaved in the past, especially those bereaved by suicide
- Children who have experienced a recent loss, e.g. death, divorce, separation.
- Children who are experiencing serious difficulties within their homes, e.g. mental illness, child protection issues.
- Children with a history of mental health difficulties, including children with a history of suicide attempts/self-harm.
- Children with a history of substance abuse.
- Non-communicative children who have trouble talking about their feelings - including children with ASD, less fluent English and less able children.

#### **5. CONTACT WITH AFFECTED FAMILY/FAMILIES**

- Home visit in first 24 hours by the Principal and/or Year head.
- Liaise with the family about funeral arrangements, clarify their wishes regarding the level of school involvement
- Be aware of cultural differences, different religious traditions, rituals.

#### **6. NORMAL REACTIONS TO A CRITICAL INCIDENT**

- Feelings: e.g. guilt, confusion, numbness etc.
- Thoughts: e.g. disbelief, preoccupation with images of event/person etc.
- Physical Responses: e.g. tiredness, sleeplessness, headaches etc.
- Behaviour: e.g. nightmares, over dependency, loss of concentration,

aggression, withdrawal etc.

## **7. SUICIDE**

- Care is needed in the use of the term “suicide” - do not use it until it is established and be sensitive to the wishes of the family. Perhaps use “Sudden/Tragic death” instead.
- Primary prevention is recommended - systems for identifying and supporting vulnerable students.
- Clear procedure is needed for any child who a staff member is concerned about.

### **Medium Term Actions**

- CIMT continues to meet daily until normal functioning resumes
- Review decision regarding closure of the school
- Set out tasks and the schedule for the day, including liaison with family and media
- Funeral arrangements.
- Staff meeting
- Review vulnerable students and staff. Plan how to monitor their coping skills over next few weeks
- Prepare for return of bereaved students and siblings.

### **Longer Term Plan**

- Monitor students
- Memorials - returning belongings to family
- Be aware of anniversaries and significant dates
- De-brief, Evaluate Response - Amend Plan if necessary (CIMT)
- Inform new staff
- Follow-up care - Samaritans, Chaplain, Psychological services visits etc.

- Watch for - hostility, hero worship, shock, grief, guilt, blame, numbness, copy-cat
- Care for principal and CIMT.

### **Role of NEPS Psychologists in Critical Incidents**

In the event of a critical incident, NEPS psychologists provide:

- Immediate short term support, information and advice - by phone or in school
- Assistance to staff in planning how to respond to a critical incident
- Screening to identify children and staff in most need of support.

It is important to note that NEPS Psychologists do not provide counselling.

### **CONSENT**

Signed informed consent is required from parents/legal guardians for NEPS to meet a student.

Consent Options are

- A general letter stating that support is available from a NEPS psychologist in the event of a critical incident.
- Ask that parents complete a slip to say they do or do not give consent (Section R3, see sample Appendix 3))

State that the school assumes agreement, unless the slip is signed and returned saying that a parent/guardian does not wish their child to be seen. State that the school will seek verbal consent to be followed by written parental consent.

### **Dealing with the Media**

- Advise parents, children and staff that only the designated spokesperson will deal with the media
- Allow limited and controlled access to the media
- Prepare a press statement - accurate, brief and carefully considered
- Protect and respect the privacy of the people most affected

- Major incidents – seek advice from the Department of Education press office and teacher unions
- Do not speak of situations outside school
- Media can be useful in dispelling rumours, and stating that the school is coping well
- Seek legal advice
- Seek PR advice.

### ***Dos & Don'ts when dealing with the Media***

- Do write a press statement (Section R6, see sample, Appendix 2)
- Do consider contacting the ASTI or other relevant body for advice and guidance
- Do use careful and sensitive language
- Do keep it short
- Do regard everything as recorded and quotable (generally the media will)
- Do ask whether there will be the possibility of editing the interview
- Do ask in advance for an outline of the questions that you will be asked
- Do avoid sweeping statements and generalisations
- Do avoid being drawn into speculation
- Don't go into personal details of those involved
- Don't read the statement to the camera
- Don't engage in rambling discussions afterwards
- Don't use "No Comment"
- Don't respond to "quotes" from others
- Don't answer questions you don't know the answer to
- Don't make "off-the-record" comments.

### **Summary Checklist for Principals**

- Gather the facts - Who? What? When? Where?
- Contact the appropriate agencies
- Convene the Critical Incident Management Team
- Organise for the supervision of students
- Inform staff
- Agree on a statement of the facts
- Identify high risk students
- Appoint someone to deal with phone enquiries
- Organise the timetable for the day
- Maintain the normal school routine when at all possible
- Inform parents/guardians
- Inform students
- Make contact with the bereaved family
- Organise support
- Respond to the media
- Decide on school arrangements for funeral, services etc.
- Prepare the Principal's letter to parents (See sample, Appendix 1 and Appendix 4)
- Decide on what information (if any) to be posted on website

### **Suggested Agenda for Meeting with CIMT / Key Staff**

- Share full details of the event
- Agree on the facts. These will need to be relayed in a clear, appropriate and consistent manner by all staff to the students

- Discuss what agencies have been contacted, and whether there are additional ones that should be informed (check Emergency Contact List Section 11, R21, also Appendix 6)
- Managing communication needs careful attention. Use of social media can be a good medium for facilitating factual and appropriate communication
- When a number of external agencies are involved in a response, coordination will be needed and procedures will need to be agreed. An agency such as NEPS may take on this role
- Plan procedures for the day
- Discuss issues relating to school routine, including school closure. Remember it is important to maintain a normal routine when at all possible. It is recommended that the school timetable runs as normal. This will provide a sense of safety and structure which is comforting for many students. Teachers should give students the opportunity to talk about what has happened and temporarily shelve all academic activities, if necessary. (See Section 11, R5 for further information).
- You may wish to consult students about what to do, if there is an event scheduled such as a trip, concert, match, etc. This should reduce the likelihood of students being angry later on as a result of any school action or in-action.
- Discuss how to break the news to relatives and close friends and who should do this (remember that they must always be told separately)
- Discuss how to break the news to the rest of the students. It is often best to do this with class groups, rather than large assemblies.
- Discuss how to identify vulnerable students
- If there are students of various nationalities and religions in the school, this needs to be taken into consideration in organising prayer services, attendance at the funeral etc.

## **Timetable for Review**

While reviewing this policy, due consideration has been given to all aspects of the wellbeing of students at St. Mary's Secondary School, Newport, and particularly to the Wellbeing Policy Statement and framework for practice (2018 – 2025), which recognises the unique position of schools in promoting the wellbeing of students.

The Critical Incident Policy will be reviewed as the need arises, and/or every three years. The next review is scheduled for 2025.

**Relevant dates for this policy:**

Policy approved and ratified by Board of Management: 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2018

Review and amendment by team: May & August 2022

Further review with the Guidance Counsellor: 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2022

Consultation with Principal: 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2022

Consultation with staff: 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2022


Consultation with Parents Council: 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2022

Draft Policy presented to Board of Management: 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2022

Policy approved by Board of Management: 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2022

Signed   
Date 14/9/22

Mr. Michael Corcoran, Chairperson, Board of Management,

Signed   
Date 14/9/2022

Mr. Kevin Cusack, Principal.

### **Bibliography**

DES. (2016). Responding to Critical Incidents NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools. Retrieved May 1, 2017, from [www.fcspa.ie](http://www.fcspa.ie):  
<http://www.fcspa.ie/downloads/Responding%20to%20Critical%20Incidents-1.pdf>

## Appendices

### APPENDIX 1:

#### TEMPLATE LETTER TO PARENTS - VIOLENT DEATH

Dear Parents,

I need to inform you about a very sad event that has happened.

(Give accurate information about the incident, but avoid using the word murder as this will not be established until the court case is completed).

A child/young person from the neighbourhood, who is the brother of \_\_\_\_\_, a student here at school, was killed as a result of (a violent incident in the street etc.) earlier this week. We are all profoundly saddened by his death.

We have shared this information and have had discussions with all of our students so that they know what has happened. School staff members have been available for students on an on-going basis today. Other support personnel (including psychologists etc., according to actual arrangements) are available to advise staff and, where necessary, to talk to students. This support will continue to be available for (if appropriate insert how long).

The death of any young person is tragic, but a violent death is even more difficult. It is hard to have to teach our children about the violence in our world and to accept that sometimes we do not have the power to prevent it.

This death may cause a variety of reactions in your child. Some children/young people may be afraid for their own life and for the lives of those they love. Take time to listen to their fears and reassure them that what has happened is rare.

We have enclosed some additional information that may be useful during this time.

The media are in the vicinity of the school and may approach you or your children. You need to respond to their questions if you are approached. We will not allow the media to

interview your child at school and our general advice is that you should not let your children be interviewed. They are not mature enough to judge what to say and may say something they will regret later.

(If planned) A support meeting for parents is planned for (date, time and place). At that time we can talk further about how to help ourselves and our children. Our thoughts are with (family name) and with each of you.

Sincerely,

Principal's Name.

## **APPENDIX 2:**

### **TEMPLATE ANNOUNCEMENT TO THE MEDIA**

*This can be used as a template by schools to be emailed, faxed or given to the media.*

*It may help to decrease the number of media calls and callers to the school.*

*In some instances, it is not appropriate to provide names or information that might identify individuals.*

*This announcement will need to be changed based upon confidentiality issues, the wishes of the victim's family and the nature of the incident.*

My name is (Name) and I am the principal of (Name) School. We learned this morning of the death of (one of students or Name of Student). This is a terrible tragedy for the \_\_\_\_\_ family(ies), our school and our community. We are deeply saddened by these events. Our sympathy and thoughts are with (Name) family and friends.

Name of student/students was a (5th Year boy/girl) and will be greatly missed by all who knew him. We have been in contact with his/her parents and they have requested that we all understand their need for privacy at this difficult time.

Offers of support have been pouring in and are greatly appreciated. Our school has implemented our Critical Incident Management Plan.

Psychologists from the National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS) and (insert other information if relevant) have been with us all day supporting and advising teachers in their efforts to assist our students at this time.

The teachers have been helping students to deal with the tragic event. The school has been open to parents, to support them and to offer them advice and guidance.

We would ask you to respect our privacy at this time.

Thank you.

### **APPENDIX 3:**

#### **SAMPLE CONSENT LETTER TO PARENTS**

Dear Parents,

Following the recent (tragedy, death of X) we have arranged professional support for students in school who need particular help. (X.....) is available to help us with this work. This support will usually consist of talking to children, either in small groups or on a one to-one basis and offering reassurance and advice as appropriate.

Your son/daughter has been identified as one of the students who would benefit from meeting with the psychologist. If you would like your child to receive this support, please sign the attached permission slip and return it to the school by \_\_\_\_\_

If you would like further information on the above or to talk to the psychologist, please indicate this on the slip or telephone the school.

Yours sincerely,

---

I/We consent to having our son/daughter met by a psychologist employed by the Minister for Education.

I/We understand that my son may meet the psychologist(s) in an individual or group session depending on the arrangements which are thought to be most appropriate.

Name of Student: \_\_\_\_\_

Class/Year: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like my son/daughter \_\_\_\_\_ to avail of the support being offered by the psychologist.

SIGNED: \_\_\_\_\_ (Parent/Guardian)

#### **APPENDIX 4:**

#### **TEMPLATE LETTER TO PARENTS – SUDDEN DEATH/ACCIDENT**

Dear Parents,

The school has experienced (the sudden death, accidental injury etc.) of .....

We are deeply saddened by the death/events.

(Brief details of the incident, and in the event of a death, perhaps some positive remembrances of the person lost).

Our thoughts are with (family name).

We have support structures in place to help your child cope with this tragedy. (Elaborate).

It is possible that your child may have some feelings and questions that he/she may like to discuss with you. It is important to give factual information that is appropriate to their age. You can help your child by taking time to listen and by encouraging them to express their feelings. All children are different and will express their feelings in different ways. It is not uncommon for children to have difficulty concentrating or to be fearful, anxious, or irritable. They may become withdrawn, cry, complain of physical aches and pains, have difficulty sleeping or have nightmares. Some may not want to eat. These are generally short term reactions. Over the course of the days to come, please keep an eye on your child and allow him to express his feelings without criticism.

Although classes will continue as usual, I anticipate that the next few days will be difficult for everyone.

(OPTIONAL) An information night for parents is planned for (date, time and place). At that time, further information about how to help children in grief will be given.

We have enclosed some information which you may find useful in helping your child through this difficult time.

If you would like advice you may contact the following people at the school.

(Details).

Principal's Signature:

## **APPENDIX 5:**

### **Short term actions – Day 1**

<b>Task</b>	<b>Name of person responsible.</b>
➤ Gather accurate information/facts	
➤ Contact appropriate agencies	
➤ Convene a meeting with key staff	
➤ Arrange supervision of students	
➤ Hold staff meeting & keep staff updated	
➤ Organise Timetable for the day	
➤ Inform Board of Management	
➤ Inform parents/parents council	

- Inform students
- Make contact with the bereaved family
- Dealing with the media
- Taking care of vulnerable students
- Meet parents/groups of parents
- Setting up an incident room

## **Appendix 6**

### **Emergency Telephone Numbers**

Ambulance, Gardaí and Fire Brigade 999 or 112

## **Our Eircode V94 RY18**

Doctor's Surgery, Newport - 061 378241

Due to GDPR regulations, the remainder of Appendix 6, along with Appendix 7, are available in the Critical Incident Folder, located in the Principal's office.