

## Permanent Memorials and How to Commemorate Those Who Died by Suicide

There is considerable controversy about creating a permanent memorial for a student who has died by suicide. Glorification of a student who took their own life could lead to contagion or serve as a focal point for vulnerable students who are struggling with their own suicidality.

On the other hand, providing no commemoration may further stigmatize suicide deaths and/or mental illness. It can also foster anger or resentment among school or community members who feel the need to honor the person who died.

This creates a dilemma for schools trying to balance appropriate commemoration activities without romanticizing the manner of death.

The Center for Disease Control <sup>1</sup> discourages permanent memorials such as planting of trees and placement of benches in memory of a student who had died by suicide. This policy is generally considered to be a “best practice” by suicide prevention experts. <sup>2</sup>

### Our recommendations include:

1. **Establish policies** that commemoration activities are the same for any death regardless of the manner or cause.
2. **Encourage honest dialogue** with friends and fellow students of the deceased about the risk of permanent memorials for “vulnerable” students. Brainstorm ways to honor the student who died that support the surviving family while furthering suicide prevention education. (Continued on the next page)

<sup>1</sup> Center for Disease Control, 1988; <sup>2</sup> Erbacher et al, 2015; Miller, 2021.



3. **Remind grieving community members** that after a few years, the permanent memorial will no longer be a reminder of the student who died but a permanent reminder of a tragic death. Permanent reminders of death contradict the life-affirming and future-orienting mission of a school.
4. **Encourage commemoration activities that support the family** such as cards or memories of their friend/classmate. Opportunities that mobilize students such as creating peer support programs or raising money for scholarships is an antidote to the sense of helplessness that often arises after a traumatic event such as a suicide death.
5. **Plan for spontaneous memorials** that show up at the deceased student's locker or at a prominent location on campus. When they do appear, it is important to have a clear plan for removal that is shared in advance with students.
6. **Consider how social media is being used by students** to process their friend's death. There is a risk of sites being used to glorify or spread rumors about the deceased. But often students will use social media to create an online memorial. These pages can be another important part of the grieving process but occasionally there will be posts by students who are considering suicide

The more consistent, proactive, and transparent a school can be in response to a student death, the more it can support and respect the needs of all students.