



# **CRITICAL INCIDENT POLICY**



## Critical Incident Policy Jonah Special School

### Policy Statement

This critical incident policy and action plan was drawn up by the Board of Management of Jonah Special School. The management and staff of the school acknowledge that the key to best managing a critical incident is forward planning. This policy intends to identify an action plan that will prepare staff as effectively as possible for dealing with an emergency or accident type situation involving staff or students' both on and off the school premises. This plan also separately and specifically includes a plan for dealing with the immediate health and safety issues which arise from an accident or emergency.

### Aims of the Policy

The main aims of the action plan are –

- To prepare the school community to better reaction at the point of occurrence of a critical event should one occur.
- To help staff and management react quickly and effectively to maintain control of the situation.
- To help the school to return to normality as soon as possible and limit the effects of the incident on staff and students.

### Critical Incident Defined

The school community accepts the general definition proposed by NEPS that '*A critical incident is any incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanism of the school.*'

For the purposes of this school it was felt useful to distinguish between an 'Onsite Critical Incident' and a more remote or removed Critical Incident. This distinction was made to allow a set of practical procedures to be put in place to help the school be better prepared for an accident or emergency type situation both on and off the school premises.

### Types of Critical Incidents

Types of events which might be considered Critical Incidents –

- The death of a member of the school community through accident, violence, suicide or suspected suicide or other unexpected deaths.
- An intrusion into the school by an aggressive individual.
- An accident involving members of the school community.
- An accident/tragedy in the wider school community.
- Serious damage to the school building through fire, flood, vandalism, etc.
- The disappearance of a member of the school community.



## ***Managing a Critical Incident on School Premises***

### **Identifying Priorities**

In the event of an onsite critical incident/accident –

- The first priority is the immediate physical safety of the school community.
- The second priority is the verification of the safety of all, and the communication of this to relevant parties – Gardaí/Parents/Board of Management.
- The third priority is to return the situation as close as is possible to normality as quickly as possible.
- The fourth priority is then to activate the procedures and help mechanisms which would be employed had the incident occurred off campus or outside hours.

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

The critical incident team is comprised of the School Principal, Director of Education, Chairperson and a Parent Representative from the Board of Management.

### **Roles and Responsibilities of the CIMT**

The Roles and Responsibilities of members of the CIMT are detailed later in this document. Each of the team members will be briefed with their roles and responsibilities upon ratification of the policy. (See Section on Communication)

### **The First Meeting**

The first meeting of the CIMT will follow the template laid down in the NEPS Guidelines and following a decision on the scale of the incident will follow through on a number or all of the steps as laid out in the guidelines.

### **Proportion of Response**

Critical incidents vary hugely in terms of severity and level of impact. The scale of the CIMT reaction will be planned to be proportional.

### **Practical Measures Taken**

- An up to date list of student's names, addresses, family details and contact numbers is available in the Principal's office at all times.
- An up to date list of all staff contact numbers is available in the Principal's office at all times.
- A list of emergency contact names and telephone numbers readily available in the Principal's office, staffroom and classrooms. The list is –
  - Waterford Gardaí.
  - Ardkeen Hospital.
  - Local General Practitioners.
  - HSE Social Workers.
  - Waterford Fire Station.
  - NEPS.



- Local DES Inspector.
- Central DES contact point.
- Fire alarm and communication systems to be adequately maintained. Staff training in the use of systems to be provided.
- NEPS handbooks available in Staffroom and Principal's Office.

### **Short Term Actions – First Day**

- Gather accurate information.
- Contact appropriate agencies.
- Convene a meeting with key staff.
- Arrange supervision of students.
- Hold staff meeting.
- Organise time table for the day.
- Inform parents.
- Inform students where appropriate.
- Make contact with the bereaved family.
- Deal with the media if necessary.

### **Medium Term Actions and Roles Assigned – 24 to 72 Hours**

- Review the events of the first 24 hours.
- Arrange support for individual/groups/parents/students/teachers.
- Plan the re-integration of staff and student's.
- Plan visits to injured.
- Liaise with family regarding funeral arrangements etc.
- Attendance and participation at Funeral Service.
- School closure.

### **Beyond 72 Hours**

- Monitor staff/student for continuing signs of stress.
- Evaluate response to incident and amend critical incident plan appropriately.
- Formalise plan for the future.
- Keep school community informed.
- Decide on appropriate way to deal with anniversaries.

## ***Critical Incident***

### **Evacuating the building in the case of a fire**

- The practiced fire drill procedure will form the basis of any evacuation situation.
- The assembly point for any critical incident evacuation will be the front grass area.
- The route to the assembly point is clearly marked in all classrooms.

### **Debriefing**

After safety is restored the school Principal will make contact with each of the members of the CIMT to redefine their roles and responsibilities:



- Contact is made with each of the students' families to arrange collection.
- The Parent Representative is available to answer other questions.
- The Staff Representative is available to answer staff questions and support safety protocol.
- The CIMT agree on a statement for the media if appropriate.
- The School Principal or Chairperson acts as spokesperson with the media and contacts DES and NEPS to inform them of the incident.
- The Chairperson liaises with outside agencies.

## ***Media Matters and Confidentiality***

### **Staff Responsibilities and Confidentiality**

Staff members will be instructed not to speak with media personnel. All queries for information should be referred to the designated school spokesperson – the School Principal or Chairperson. A short formula of words should be used, for example – *'I am sorry but all requests for information at this time must be made to the schools spokesperson, Ms Kavanagh. Thank you.'*

In emergency situations there may be intense pressure for comment, but it will be explained that any comment made can be easily misinterpreted or inadvertently cause complications or offence.

In terms of confidentiality the starting point is that all information regarding any incident which has been learned or gathered within the school should be regarded as confidential. Information about individual members of the school community is also confidential in these cases.

All statements conveyed by the spokesperson to the media will be prepared and agreed by the CIMT.

## ***Outside Agency Support***

### **Enlisting Outside Agency Support**

In an effort to free school staff for a variety of tasks and to allow the school function as normally as possible, additional support will be requested from neighbouring schools. This support will be requested, and details of possible functions outlined as part of the planning process. Professional support may be requested by the Principal from NEPS or other support agencies.

## ***Communication and Reporting***

### **Communication and Critical Incident**

- The value of clear communication at time of crisis is vital.
- Instructions to staff and students will be clear and unambiguous. Immediate clarification of unclear instructions should be sought from staff representative.
- Concerns regarding potential safety issues should be raised calmly and with clarity.
- Clear lines of communication and chain of command should be followed.
- Un-necessary or speculative conversations are not helpful.



## Members of the Critical Incident Management Team:

***Caitríona Barry (Principal), Niamh McEvoy (Clinical Director), Seamus Phelan (Chairperson) & Sinead Connelly (Patron/Parent Representative).***

## Critical Incidents Management Team Roles and Responsibilities

*Leadership Role: **Caitríona Barry***

Intervention –

- Confirm the event.
- Convene the C.I.M. team and activate the C.I. plan.
- Express sympathy to family.
- Locate situational support for the family where possible.
- Clarify facts surrounding event.
- Make contact with other relevant agencies.
- Decide how news will be communicated to different groups (staff, students, outside school).

Post Intervention –

- Ensure provision of ongoing support to staff and students.
- Facilitate any appropriate memorial events.
- Review Plan.

*Communication Role (Chairperson): **Seamus Phelan***

Intervention –

- With team prepare a public statement.
- Organise designated room to address media promptly.
- Ensure telephone line is free for outgoing and important incoming calls.
- Liaison with relevant outside support agencies.

Post Intervention –

- Review and evaluate effectiveness of communication response.

*Student Liaison/Counselling Role: **Niamh McEvoy***

Intervention –

- Ensure safety of immediate environment.
- Outline specific services available in school.
- Put in place clear referral procedures.
- Address immediate needs of staff.
- Information.
- Counselling.



#### Post Intervention –

- Ongoing support to vulnerable student's.
- Monitor class most affected.
- Refer on, as appropriate.
- Review and evaluate plan.

*Family Liaison Role: **Sinead Connelly***

#### Intervention –

- Coordinate contact with families (following first contact by Principal).
- Consult with family around involvement of school in e.g. funeral service.
- Assist with all communication dealing with parents of any student affected by critical incident.

#### Post Intervention –

- Provide ongoing support to bereaved family.
- Involve as appropriate family in school liturgies/memorial services.
- Offer to link family with community support groups.
- Review and evaluate plan.

## ***Short and Medium Term Action Plans***

### **Short Term Actions – The First Day**

- Immediate contact with family/families.
- Consult with the family regarding appropriate support from the school, e.g. funeral service.
- Ensure that a quiet place can be made for students/staff.
- Rooms will be made available as follows:
  - Prayer room: Class
  - Individual Meetings: Principal offices and staffroom.

### **Media Briefing**

- Designate a spokesperson. (Principal and/or Chairperson)
- Prepare a brief statement. (Team)
- Protect the family's privacy. (Team and Staff)
- Gather accurate information. (Team and Staff)
- It is important to obtain accurate information about the incident –
  - A. What happened, where and when?
  - B. What is the extent of the injuries?
  - C. How many are involved and what are their names?
  - D. Is there a risk of further injury?
  - E. What agencies have been contacted already?
- Contact appropriate agencies –
  - A. Emergency services.
  - B. Medical services.
  - C. H.S.E. Psychology Departments/Community Care Services.
  - D. NEPS.



- E. BOM.
- F. DES/Schools Inspector.
- Convene a meeting with Key Staff/Critical Management Team (9.00 a.m.).
  - A. Organize a staff meeting, if appropriate. (9.15 a.m.).
  - B. Organize timetable/routine for the day. (Adhering to the normal school routine is important, if this is possible).
  - C. Class teachers to take note of any absentees who might need to be contacted, list of friends etc., or any other relevant information and give to the Student Liaison Person.
  - D. Arrange supervision of students.
- Liaise with the family regarding funeral arrangements/memorial service.
  - A. The Chairperson/Principal will liaise with the family, to extend sympathy and clarify the family's wishes regarding the schools involvement in funeral/memorial service.
  - B. Arrange a home visit by a staff representative and a parent representative within 24 hours, if appropriate. (Student Liaison Person & Parent Liaison Person).
  - C. Have regard for different religious traditions and faiths.

## Medium Term Action Plan (24 –72 HOURS)

- Preparation of students/staff attending funeral.
- Involvement of students/staff in liturgy if agreed by bereaved family.
- Facilitation of students/staff's responses, e.g. sympathy cards, flowers, book of condolences, etc.
- Ritual within the school.
- Review the events of the first 24 hours:
  - A. Reconvene Key Staff/Critical Incident Management Team. (9.00 a.m.).
  - B. Decide arrangements for support meetings for parents, students and staff.
  - C. Decide on mechanism for feedback from teachers on vulnerable students.
  - D. Have review of Critical Incident Management Team meeting. (3.15 p.m.)
  - E. Establish contact with absent staff and students.
- Arrange support for individual student, groups of students and parents, if necessary.
  - A. Hold support/information meeting for parents/students, if necessary, in order to clarify what has happened.
  - B. Give any teacher who feels uncomfortable with involvement in support meetings the choice of opting out.
  - C. Arrange, in consultation, with outside agencies, individual or group debriefings or support meetings with parental permission.
- Plan for the re-integration of students and staff e.g. absentees, injured, siblings, close relative etc.:
  - A. Student Liaison Person to liaise with above on their return to school.
  - B. Plan visits to injured.
  - C. Principal, Family Liaison Person and class teacher to visit home/hospital.
  - D. Attendance and participation at funeral/memorial service (To be decided).
  - E. Decide this in accordance with parents' wishes and school management decisions and in consultation with close school friends.
  - F. School closure.
  - G. Request a decision on this from school management.

## Long Term Action Plan

- Monitor students for signs of continuing distress. If, over a prolonged period of time, a student continues to display the following, he/she may need assistance from the Health Board:
  - A. Uncharacteristic behaviour.
  - B. Deterioration in academic performance.





- C. Physical symptoms — e.g. weight loss/gain, lack of attention to appearance, tiredness, restlessness.
- D. Inappropriate emotional reactions.
- E. Increased absenteeism.
- Evaluate response to incident and amend Critical Incident Management Plan appropriately:
  - A. What went well?
  - B. Where were the gaps?
  - C. What was most/least helpful?
  - D. Have all necessary onward referrals to support services been made?
  - E. Is there any unfinished business?
- Formalise the Critical Incident Plan for the future:
  - A. Consult with NEPS Psychologist.
- Inform new staff/new school student affected by Critical Incidents where appropriate.
  - A. Ensure that new staff is aware of the school policy and procedures in this area.
  - B. Ensure they are aware of which students were affected in any recent incident and in what way.
  - C. When individual students or a class of students affected by an incident are transferring to a new school, it would be useful to brief the Principal of the new school.
- Decide on appropriate ways to deal with anniversaries (be sensitive to special days and events).
  - A. Anniversaries may trigger emotional responses in students/staff and they may need additional support at this time.
  - B. Acknowledge the anniversary with the family.
  - C. Be sensitive to significant days like Birthdays, Christmas, Mother's Day and Father's Day.
- Plan a school memorial service.
- Care of deceased person's possessions – what are the parent's wishes?
- Update and amend school records.

## ***Managing a Critical Incident that Occurs off site***

### **Types of Events Involved**

- The death of a staff member who was terminally ill.
- The death of a student who was terminally ill.
- A fire near the school, not resulting in serious injury.
- Serious damage to school property.
- A serious injury or fatality to members of the community.
- Death or serious injury to members of staff or students.

### **Action Plan**

- Gather accurate information. It is important to gather accurate information about the incident; otherwise rumours may take over and add to the distress of those involved.
- Establish the facts –
  - What has happened?
  - When it happened?
  - How it happened?
  - The number and name of staff and students involved
  - Any other parties involved.
  - The extent of the injuries.
  - The location of those involved.
- Contact appropriate agencies –
  - Emergency Services.
  - Medical Services.



- Board of Management.
- NEPS.
- HSE.
- Teacher Union.
- Parish Priest Clergy.
- Convene a CIMT meeting.
- Convene a meeting with key staff.

### Other Useful Reference Books

- Someone to Talk Too (Bernardos, Pat Donnelly).
- Breaking the Silence in the Workplace.
- Responding to Suicide (Irish Hospice/Console).
- When Tragedy Strikes (INTO/UTU).
- Responding to Critical Incidents.
- Booklets (DES).
- Guidelines for Schools.
- Advice and Information Pack for Schools.
- Resource Material for Schools.
- Books from Rainbows Library (Rainbow Organiser).
- Grief at Work (Breffni McGuinness, Irish Hospice Foundation).

### Jonah Special School

Critical Incident Policy.

This policy was adopted by the Board of Management of Jonah Special School at its meeting held on:

**Ratified by the Jonah Board of Management on:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date**

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Principal**

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Chairperson, Board of Management**

**Next Review Period: *September 2026***