

HANDLING CRISES FROM VIRTUAL PLATFORMS

As we've all learned from recent circumstances, the possibility of schools being out for extended periods of time is a new reality. It's a reality that must be incorporated into our crisis response procedures for students and staff. MSCA has drafted some tips and pointers for this new section in your crisis manual.

Pre-Planning

- Having a school team for this planning is essential. With the administration as the lead, key teachers, counseling staff, school nurse, school psychologist/social worker, school resource officer, head custodian and possibly someone from food service would be valuable members for this team.
- The school team should address equity and access issues of the students and come up with a plan for work completion and grading.
- Discuss with your administrator how to ensure the security of student records, and how those records should be accessed
- With your administrator, develop a list for continuity of operations that includes who the primary and backup individuals are for the responsibilities outlined in your planning
- Have discussions with your administrator and crisis team to identify resources and responsibilities for keeping students and parents informed
 - Prepare handouts, announcements, etc. ahead of time to have ready
- Create a calendar of meetings for the faculty with the administration so updates/check-ins can be shared. Specific dates are not necessary; something as simple as "Mondays are faculty meetings; Tuesdays are meetings with the counseling department; Wednesdays are team meetings", etc. can help create continuity of communication and forward motion.
- Discuss with your administrator the expectations of the counseling department. Clearly define the scope and function of your role in concrete terms.
 - Develop alternative plans in the event of illness and/or changes in leadership/staff
- Identify with administration the ways the counseling program can assist in the transition to virtual learning.
 - Prepare handouts, resources and other information ahead of time to have ready
- Review your district's social media policies.
 - If your district requires specific procedures for talking with students from a virtual platform in the event of a shut-down, discuss how to get those procedures enacted with appropriate stakeholders and when the best time would be to do so
- Get training on virtual counseling (webinars, online courses, MSCA or ASCA presentations).
- Make a list of items that you want to bring home for your school counselor activities (i.e. DFS referral information, suicide ideation paperwork, referral/resource list, phone number of emergency personnel, ASCA Code of Ethics, your building's Crisis Manual).

- Most of these can be prepared and gathered ahead of time. Put them in a folder or packet where you can just “grab and go.”
- Prepare lessons that students can do from home both with or without the internet. This is a good time to utilize Missouri Connections and/or have students work on their ICAPs.
 - Prepare these ahead of time and have them ready
- Include information about how and when to contact you with the lessons so everyone knows how to reach you in case of need. (e-mail, text messaging, phone, virtual platform)
 - This information can be readied ahead of any event
- Secondary and Multilevel school counselors: discuss how senior grades, graduation, prom, awards night, testing will be handled
- Discuss with your administrator how IEPs and 504s will be handled, in consultation with Special Education (i.e. how meetings will be held, who leads, how interventions/accommodations will be handled)
 - Add any documents to your packet of items to be taken home
- Put important forms and documents into electronic formats with which the staff is familiar so people who need them can get easy access (i.e. meeting forms, forms for student issues such as suicide, abuse, etc.).
 - Consider creating a list or spreadsheet of all electronic documents/forms with details about who can and should access what (include their role, as well as name). Share this list with your administrator or supervisor.
- Put copies of all important forms, manuals, information on a flash drive as a back-up.
- Identify the district/building guidelines on student contact and devise a plan for connecting with students based upon those guidelines that values available methods and honors counselors’ private information.

Procedures for the School Counselor

- Prepare your website/social media accounts and communicate pertinent information to your stakeholders. It may be helpful to create a stand-alone document with this information that can easily be shared/posted on multiple platforms and easily referenced (e.g., in a shared Google drive, via social media from you and your school administrator). This information should include:
 - Emergency procedures, including a clear directive to call 911 if there is an emergency
 - Emergency phone numbers and other resources, including child abuse and neglect hotline information
 - The hours you will be working
 - How people may reach you
 - Any activities you will be providing
 - Any activities you typically offer that will not be provided remotely (redirect to appropriate contact if applicable)

- Any restrictions that stakeholders should know about (i.e. district policy on contact using virtual platforms)
- Investigate how you might deliver the school counseling program electronically to help alleviate worries and fears (work together with all the counselors and administrators in the school district):
 - Check-ins with vulnerable students via live-stream or texting or email
 - Work with your administrator and other school personnel to determine how vulnerable students will be identified and monitored, including when/how you'll be contacted and by whom; this may be part of a building- or school-level system to have regular check-ins with all students, monitor "absences," etc.
 - Teaching coping skills using posted videos and other information on websites, social media, Youtube, etc.
 - To the extent possible, post vetted and public resources on your website where they can be accessed by a variety of stakeholder on an as-needed basis
 - Supporting school staff with their own self-care and/or how they can best supports students and their families
 - Staff may need additional resources and coaching around social-emotional learning and/or identifying vulnerable young people who need further supports
 - Offer to host/participate in teacher virtual meetings and/or do weekly teacher check-ins
 - Help students transition to online or livestream format.
 - Giving study techniques and tips on social media or websites
 - Reach out to students who have special identified learning needs-work with the special education department
 - Assist families to access free internet services (be available via phone **specific hours** for those who do not have internet)
 - Provide additional ideas and resources to parents/caregivers about how they can best support their students in distance learning; consider offering relevant information and resources for parents/caregivers on coping with distance-learning, managing stress, etc.
 - Being available via text, phone, or email for students who have questions about grades, college/career issues (financial aid, A+, letters of recommendation, scholarships, ICAPs, etc...)
 - Promoting the use of MoConnections or other such tools that the school uses to help them focus on the future.
- Take your folder of information home!
- Take care of yourself
 - You cannot be available 24/7. Make sure it is clear when you are available. Set specific office hours and honor them, as much as is possible.

- Have an up-front conversation with your administrator (and other counselors in your building/district, if applicable) about how you should address concerns about exceeding your defined workload. If possible, schedule a regular check-in with your administrator to discuss your workload and opportunities for improvement.
- Exercise every day (take walks, stretch, lift weights, etc...). Get outdoors if you can.
- Practice good coping skills. Don't over indulge (food, alcohol, tobacco, social media, video games, TV etc..).
- Get enough sleep.
- Connect with friends and family (call or video chat).
- Be creative (whatever that is for you: crafts, photography, dance, music-singing or a musical instrument, etc..)
- Pray, meditate, or get in touch with your spiritual side.

Protocol for Online Meetings

Online meetings can be efficient and effective ways to communicate with various audiences and to conduct business. In some cases, counseling sessions can also be conducted online. If you are using an online meeting platform for any reason, be sure to follow these important steps:

1. Get definitive instructions and expectations from your district/administration regarding online meetings of any type with students, staff, parents, and others. Make sure you are clear about expectations, limitations, accountability and liability.
2. Ask your teachers' association representatives about best practices for online meetings, your responsibilities and your liability.
3. For online meetings of any type, seriously consider having another educator in the meeting with you. If the meeting is with a student, it's very important to have the parent present, if at all possible. It's critical to have someone from your staff present who can attest to what happened, what was said/not said during the meeting.
4. You might consider asking students to have a parent at home if/when you connect with them virtually. This could be especially important if there is an emergency situation with the student, such as suicidal ideation.
5. Do NOT post pictures of students anywhere without the express approval of your administration!
6. Send communication to students through their parents'/guardians' email or through Google Classroom. Always blind copy yourself so you have a record of what has been sent.
7. Be extra cautious with what you write and say virtually. It's impossible to know who has access to this information.
8. Whenever you are on a virtual platform, make sure you are professionally dressed. Expect the same from the person(s) you are interacting with. If someone, especially a student, is not dressed appropriately, end the meeting immediately. Tell the student you will contact them later in the day and that you expect they will be dressed appropriately. Let your administrator know what happened and document the situation in your notes.

How To Handle A Potentially Suicidal Student

If you are **currently working with a student** who appears to be experiencing a suicidal crisis **begin at Step 1.**

If you are **informed of a student** who may be having a suicidal crisis by another member of the school community, **proceed to Step 2.**

Step 1: If a student you are working with appears to be having a suicidal crisis use active listening to:

- Establish a trusting relationship with the student
- Decrease the intensity of the student's emotions
- Ask about the student's current state of mind, if he/she has a plan, if he/she has a way to carry the plan out, and when (date, time) the student intends to carry out the plan

Step 2: Inform parents/families

If you are in direct contact with the student in crisis maintain video/voice contact with the student while this contact is made, if possible. For example, you might ask the student to bring the phone/laptop to the parent/guardian/another adult, if the parent/guardian/another adult is in the same place as the student.

If the parent/guardian is NOT in the same place as the student:

- **For the safety of the student, talk with another adult who is currently with the student:**
 - Share the information you have with the adult
 - Tell the adult you are calling 911 for a wellness check at the address they are currently at
 - Ask the adult to stay with the student until emergency responders are with the student
 - Contact the parent/guardian to let them know where the student is at and that you have called 911 and asked for a wellness check

If the parent/guardian is WITH the student:

- Share the information you have with parent/guardian
- Tell the parent/guardian to stay with the child until the 911 Emergency Responders/Crisis Team arrives for an assessment

- Verify the address and phone number the student is currently at
- **Call 911 (if you believe the student is in imminent danger or you are unsure. Call the crisis line if you do not believe the student is in imminent danger, but does require an evaluation: 866-495-6735**
- Notify 911 or Crisis Line of your concerns regarding the student. Have as much of the following information as possible available from your Student Management System or parent/guardian:
 - Student's name
 - Student's birthdate
 - Name(s) of parent/guardian who has custody
 - Phone numbers and addresses of parent/guardian(s) who have custody
 - Address and phone number(s) of people student is currently with

If the parent/guardian is not available, the risk to the student is high, and/or the student is alone:

- Verify the address the student is at and the phone number
- **Call 911 and ask for a wellness check at the address the student is currently at**
- Stay on the line with the student as long as possible, or until emergency responders arrive. (If you have a second phone available, contact 911 with one phone while keeping the student on the first phone)
- Give parent/guardian contact information and addresses to emergency responders
- Continue to try and contact family members regarding concerns

Step 3: Document information received, decisions made and actions taken

- **Document the statements you received from the student, family, other adult, Crisis Line and/or 911 dispatcher and first responders. Also document the time you talked with the student, called parents/guardians, called 911 or Crisis Line, contacted administrator and/or school counselor.**
- Contact your administrator to alert him/her regarding concerns and actions taken
- Notify the school counselor your building so they can follow up with the student and family:

If you have concerns about any student, the student is not in imminent danger, and you aren't sure how to proceed, please call your administrator or one of the counselors. If the counselor for your building isn't available, please contact another counselor on the list.

Adapted from: ASCA FAQ's Virtual School Counseling Ethics, March 25, 2020

<https://www.schoolcounselor.org/school-counselors/legal-ethical/faqs-virtual-school-counseling-ethics>

Handling a Death of Student or Staff Member

- Follow the protocol you have for a death under normal conditions
 - Family contact
 - Sharing of information with students/staff
 - Family wishes for remembrance
- Confer with your Crisis Team members via Zoom or in whatever format you feel is best
- Notify relevant individuals, such as specific teachers, parents, students
 - Consider extending whatever system you've established for checking-in with vulnerable students to individuals affected by the death, including students, families, and school personnel
- Provide students, parents and staff members with any restrictions that may be in place due to the event.
- Share your office hours and the hours of others on your team who would be appropriate to provide counseling and support; think about extending those hours for a set period of time
- Discuss having virtual opportunities for grief sharing; perhaps include grief specialists from the community
- Discuss if/how to honor the individual, the means, the timing, and how to notify people
- Provide information from various community resources
- Debrief with fellow Crisis Team members and do frequent check-ins with one another

Returning to "Normal" Schooling

- Before transitioning back to business-as-usual, talk with your crisis team (and others as needed) about any potential implications of school resuming for vulnerable/impacted individuals in the school community (including students and all adults), keeping in mind how circumstances may have affected "typical" grief processes and how much experiences may vary from person to person.
 - Consider opportunities for informal events to help re-orient the entire school community to business-as usual
 - School counselors and members of the crisis team can make plans to be highly visible in the hallways and entrances to school and classrooms; stop in to greet teachers and staff members
 - Consider/plan ideas for classroom meetings for teachers to use in the first few days back to school
 - Participate in planning meetings to fully prepare school staff for student re-entry based on current circumstances (i.e. teachers could easily become overwhelmed when trying to meet students where they are after long periods of absence with inconsistent access to learning during the absence - be mindful of how other factors, such as SES, may exacerbate those differences)
 - Work with your school administrator and other school counselors to develop a plan to acknowledge and address the trauma individuals (students and staff) may

have experienced or been exposed to (i.e., prolonged periods of isolation, depression, social anxiety, grief). Be prepared to address a possible spike in reports of child abuse and neglect.

- Make a list of students for whom you have high concern; make checking in with them a priority once school resumes
- Call a meeting of your crisis team to discuss what worked in the plan and what needs to be adjusted
- Talk with your administrator about having debriefing meetings with teachers/teams of teachers to discuss the successes and challenges they felt during the time the virtual platform had to be used
- If school is closed for the remainder of the school year, it's possible that some staff members may not be returning in the fall; this makes saying goodbye an issue. Consider putting together a video of brief messages from those staff members and/or a booklet of written messages from staff members who may be leaving. This could be highly valuable to students and staff alike.
- Go back through the Pre-Planning section of this document to see what needs to be put in place before a lengthy cancellation might become another reality

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

If you are experiencing an emergency, please contact the appropriate services listed below:

Emergency: 911

Missouri Statewide Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline: 1-800-392-3738

Suicide Prevention: 1-800-273-TALK (8255) [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

Trevor Hotline for LGBTQ Youth: 1-866-488-7386 [thetrevorproject.org](https://www.thetrevorproject.org)

Sexual Abuse: 1-800-656-HOPE (4673) [rainn.org](https://www.rainn.org)

Child Sex Trafficking Text: BEFREE to 888-383-7888

Behavioral Health Response: 1-314-469-4908 24 hour mental health crisis hotline

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline: [samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline](https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline)