STUDENT GRIEF & TRAUMATIC LOSS REFORM PROPOSAL

A Call for Consistent, Compassionate and Accountable School-System Responses

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Executive Summary

The death of a student does not affect only one family. It affects siblings, classmates, friends, teachers, educational assistants, administrators, coaches and the broader school community.

When a child dies, schools can suddenly become places of grief, trauma, confusion and uncertainty. Families may also be navigating their own devastating loss while trying to understand what support is available for their children.

This proposal calls for school boards to establish a consistent, trauma-informed and family-centred framework for responding to student death, traumatic loss and significant bereavement.

The goal is not to create a one-size-fits-all response to grief. Every death and every family is different.

The goal is to ensure that no student, family or school community is left without a clear pathway to support simply because the response depends on the individual school, administrator or circumstances.

This proposal also addresses a broader student-safety issue: transportation for school-sanctioned trips. It recommends that students participating in school-sanctioned off-site activities be transported using organized school-board-approved bus transportation, whether that transportation is provided by a school bus or an appropriately contracted coach bus, rather than relying on students or families to provide transportation in personal vehicles except where a documented exception is necessary.

Ontario already requires school boards to promote student achievement and well-being and to maintain policies and organizational structures supporting those goals. Ontario's PPM 169 also requires boards to provide evidence-informed mental-health promotion, prevention and early-intervention supports and to work with families and community partners.

This proposal asks that those existing responsibilities be translated into clear, measurable practices when students and school communities experience death and traumatic loss.

PART I — STUDENT GRIEF & TRAUMATIC LOSS

1. Establish a Board-Wide Student Death & Traumatic Loss Protocol

Proposal
The school board should create and implement a formal Student Death & Traumatic Loss Response Protocol that applies consistently across all schools.

The protocol should provide guidance for:

- The first 24 hours
- The first 72 hours
- The first week
- The first month
- Longer-term follow-up
- Anniversaries and significant dates
- The return to school following a death
- Supporting siblings
- Supporting close friends and classmates
- Supporting educators and school staff
- Communication with the bereaved family
- Communication with the broader school community
- Memorials and remembrance activities
- Media and social-media communication
- Referral to community supports

The protocol should allow flexibility based on the family's wishes, the circumstances of the death and the needs of students.

Desired Outcome
Every school should have a clear roadmap for responding to a student death rather than creating a response from scratch during a crisis.

2. Create a Dedicated Bereaved-Family Liaison

Proposal
When a student dies, the family should be offered one designated Bereavement Liaison from the school board.

The liaison should serve as the family's consistent point of contact.

The liaison could assist with:

- School communication
- Questions about school procedures
- Sibling support
- Academic accommodations
- School records and personal belongings
- Memorial and remembrance requests
- Referrals to appropriate community supports
- Communication between the family, school and board
- Follow-up meetings
- Concerns about how the school response is progressing

Principle
A grieving family should not have to repeatedly explain its circumstances to multiple people.

3. Establish a Long-Term Student Grief Support Plan

Proposal
Support should not end when the funeral is over.

For students significantly affected by a death, schools should establish an individualized support plan when appropriate.

Potential check-in points could include:

- First week
- First month
- Three months
- Six months
- One-year anniversary
- Significant anniversaries or dates
- Return to school after an extended absence
- Major school transitions

Students should be able to receive renewed support when their grief changes or resurfaces.

Principle
Grief is not a short-term school event.

A student may appear to be functioning well initially and struggle later. Schools should recognize that grief can affect students academically, socially and emotionally over time.

4. Create a Specific Sibling Support Protocol

Proposal
A student who loses a sibling should automatically be identified as someone who may require additional support, without requiring the student to first demonstrate a crisis.

The board should establish guidance addressing:

- Academic flexibility
- Attendance
- Assignment deadlines
- Testing and examination accommodations where appropriate
- A trusted adult within the school
- Regular check-ins
- Communication with parents/guardians
- Support surrounding anniversaries
- Transition between grades or schools
- Access to community-based supports

Principle
The surviving sibling is not simply "the student who remains."

They are a grieving child or young person experiencing the death of an immediate family member.

5. Mandatory Grief & Traumatic-Loss Training for School Staff

Proposal

School administrators and relevant school staff should receive professional learning on:

- Childhood and adolescent grief
- Traumatic grief
- Sudden death
- How grief may present differently in children and teenagers
- Changes in behaviour and academic performance
- Supporting siblings
- Supporting classmates
- Appropriate language when discussing death
- What not to say
- Recognizing when additional support may be required
- Trauma-informed practices
- Supporting grieving staff members

Ontario's PPM 169 already requires boards to support educator and staff mental-health literacy and emphasizes trauma-informed practice.

The proposal is to ensure that grief and traumatic loss are explicitly addressed within that broader framework.

6. Develop a Family Communication Standard

Proposal
The board should create a written communication protocol for situations involving student death or traumatic loss.

It should address:

- Who contacts the family
- When contact occurs
- Who communicates with siblings
- How information is shared with students
- How information is shared with parents
- How the family's wishes are respected
- How corrections to inaccurate information are handled
- Social-media communication
- Media inquiries
- Memorial announcements
- Privacy considerations

Principle
Families should not have to wonder:

"Who do I talk to?"

or

"Who is responsible for communicating with us?"

7. Create a Formal Family Consultation Process

Proposal
Families affected by student death should have an opportunity to provide feedback about the school's response.

The board should offer a structured post-incident meeting where families can discuss:

- What worked
- What did not work
- What support was missing
- What communication could have been improved
- What should be changed for future families

This feedback should be reviewed at the board level rather than remaining solely within the individual school.

8. Establish an Independent Review Process for Serious Concerns

Proposal
Where a family believes the board's response to a death or traumatic event was inadequate or inconsistent with board policy, there should be a clearly defined review process.

The process should include:

- A designated person responsible for receiving the concern
- Clear timelines
- Written acknowledgment
- Review of applicable policies
- Documentation of findings
- A mechanism for escalation
- Identification of systemic recommendations where appropriate

Principle
Accountability should be about learning, transparency and preventing future harm, not simply assigning blame.

9. Create a Bereaved Family & Student Advisory Group

Proposal
The board should establish a standing advisory group that includes, where possible:

- Bereaved parents
- Students and youth
- School administrators
- Teachers
- Educational assistants
- School mental-health professionals
- Community mental-health organizations
- Grief professionals
- Other relevant community representatives

The group could review:

- Board policies
- Training materials
- Communication procedures
- Student support plans
- Memorial guidelines
- Critical-incident procedures
- Proposed policy changes

Principle
Policies affecting grieving students and families should include the voices of people who have actually lived through these experiences.

10. Integrate Grief Support Into the Board's Mental-Health Strategy

Proposal
Student grief and traumatic loss should be explicitly considered within the board's existing mental-health strategy and annual action planning.

Ontario's PPM 169 requires boards to maintain a three-year mental-health and addictions strategy and one-year action plan, with input from students, families and local community-based child and youth mental-health providers.

The board should identify:

- Available grief supports
- Staff training
- Community partnerships
- Referral pathways
- Response protocols
- Student follow-up
- Evaluation measures
- Gaps in service

PART II — STUDENT SAFETY & SCHOOL-SANCTIONED TRANSPORTATION

11. Require Organized Bus Transportation for School-Sanctioned Trips

Proposal
For all school-sanctioned trips and off-site activities where student transportation is required, the school board should establish a standard that students are transported using board-approved organized bus transportation.

This should include either:

- A properly approved school bus; or
- An appropriately contracted and approved coach bus.

The standard should apply to activities such as:

- Athletic competitions
- Tournaments
- Field trips
- Educational excursions
- School competitions
- Conferences
- Clubs and extracurricular activities
- Overnight school trips
- Arts and performance trips
- Trades and technology competitions
- Other board- or school-sanctioned off-site activities

Core Recommendation
Students participating in a school-sanctioned trip should travel as a group using transportation arranged and approved by the school board, rather than being routinely transported by students' families in personal vehicles.

Personal-vehicle transportation should only occur where there is a clearly defined and documented exception.

12. Establish Consistent Transportation Safety Standards

The board should develop one consistent transportation standard covering all school-sanctioned trips.

The policy should address:

- Driver requirements
- Appropriate licensing
- Required qualifications
- Driver screening
- Hours-of-service considerations
- Emergency procedures
- Board/vendor requirements
- Vehicle requirements
- Appropriate vehicle type
- Required inspections
- Maintenance requirements
- Insurance requirements
- Safety equipment
- Emergency procedures
- Student accountability

Every trip should have:

- A current student roster
- Emergency contact information
- Staff/chaperone assignments
- Departure and arrival procedures
- Attendance checks
- Procedures for unexpected delays
- Procedures for emergencies
- A clear process for accounting for every student before departure and after arrival
- Transportation consistency

The board should avoid situations where one school uses organized transportation while another school routinely relies on families to transport students for comparable activities.

13. Minimize Personal-Vehicle Transportation for School Activities

Proposal
The board should establish a presumption that personal vehicles are not the standard transportation method for school-sanctioned student activities.

Exceptions could be considered for circumstances such as:

- Accessibility requirements
- Medical needs
- Family-requested arrangements
- Emergency situations
- Activities where organized transportation is genuinely unavailable
- Other circumstances specifically permitted by board policy

Any exception should be documented and approved according to a consistent board process.

Why This Matters
When families are asked to transport students individually for school activities, responsibility for transportation can become fragmented.

A board-arranged transportation model creates a clearer system for:

- Accountability
- Student rosters
- Supervision
- Emergency response
- Communication
- Consistent expectations

Ontario identifies school buses as one of the safest ways for children to travel to school and provides specific safety requirements and procedures surrounding school buses.

This proposal would require the board to determine the appropriate safety standards for both school buses and contracted coach buses rather than treating all forms of student transportation as interchangeable.

14. Require a Transportation Plan for Every School-Sanctioned Trip

Proposal
Before a school-sanctioned trip is approved, the school should have a documented transportation plan containing:

Trip Information

- Destination
- Date
- Departure time
- Expected return time

Transportation

- Transportation provider
- Vehicle type
- Driver information
- Number of students
- Number of staff/chaperones

Student Accountability

- Master roster
- Emergency contacts
- Attendance procedure
- Head-count procedure

Emergency Planning

- Emergency contact
- Emergency meeting procedures
- Communication plan
- Procedure for delays, breakdowns or other emergencies

This documentation should be retained according to board policy.

PART III — ACCOUNTABILITY & MEASUREMENT

15. Create Measurable Outcomes

A reform is only meaningful if the board can determine whether it is working.

The board should establish measures such as:

- Percentage of schools trained in grief and traumatic-loss response
- Percentage of relevant staff completing training
- Number of student-death responses using the board protocol
- Number of bereaved families offered a designated liaison
- Number of affected students receiving documented follow-up
- Availability of community referral pathways
- Family feedback following a response
- Compliance with school-trip transportation standards
- Number of transportation exceptions and reasons for those exceptions
- Identified policy gaps and corrective actions

Personal information should be protected and reporting should use aggregated information where appropriate.

PPM 169 already requires boards to collect, use and report information to monitor and evaluate student mental-health activities, subject to applicable privacy obligations.

PART IV — REQUESTS TO THE SCHOOL BOARD

I respectfully ask the Board of Education to consider the following actions:

Immediate Actions

- Review the board's existing student-death and traumatic-loss procedures.
- Identify gaps between current practice and the recommendations in this proposal.
- Identify who is responsible for responding to student death and traumatic loss at the school and board levels.
- Review the board's existing mental-health strategy for explicit consideration of grief and traumatic loss.
- Review transportation policies for school-sanctioned trips.

Policy Development

- Develop a formal Student Death & Traumatic Loss Response Protocol.
- Establish a Bereaved-Family Liaison process.
- Establish a Sibling Support Protocol.
- Establish minimum grief and traumatic-loss training expectations.
- Establish a family feedback and review process.
- Establish a standardized school-sanctioned transportation policy.

Community Engagement

- Create a Bereaved Family & Student Advisory Group.
- Consult students, parents, educators and community organizations.
- Invite bereaved families to contribute to policy development.

Accountability

- Establish measurable implementation targets.
- Report progress to the Board of Trustees.
- Identify which changes can be made at the board level and which require provincial policy or legislative change.

PART V — REQUEST FOR A FORMAL RESPONSE

I respectfully request that the school board provide a written response identifying:

Recommendation	Can the Board Act?	Responsible Department/Person	Proposed Timeline	Provincial Action Required?
Student Death & Traumatic Loss Protocol				
Bereaved-Family Liaison				
Long-Term Grief Support				
Sibling Support Protocol				
Staff Training				
Family Communication Standard				
Independent Review Process				
Bereaved Family Advisory Group				
Mental-Health Strategy Integration				
School-Sanctioned Transportation Standard				
Trip Transportation Plans				

The purpose of this table is to move the discussion from acknowledgement to **specific responsibility, timelines and measurable action.**

PART VI — A CALL FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

This proposal comes from lived experience, but it is not intended to be about one family alone.

It is about asking a fundamental question:
If a student dies tomorrow, is our school system prepared to respond in a way that protects, supports and respects the students and family left behind?

If the answer is not a confident yes, then there is an opportunity to improve the system before another family has to experience that uncertainty.

No policy can take away the pain of losing a child.

No protocol can make grief disappear.

But a better system can ensure that grieving students are recognized, families are heard, staff know what to do, communication is handled thoughtfully, support continues beyond the immediate crisis, and lessons from one experience are used to improve the system for the next family.

That is the purpose of this proposal.

APPENDIX A — KEY PRINCIPLES

Any future policy should be guided by these principles:

1. Student-centred
The needs of students should remain central.

2. Family-centred
Families should be treated as partners in decisions affecting their children.

3. Trauma-informed
Responses should recognize the effects of traumatic experiences and avoid unnecessary re-traumatization.

4. Individualized
No two grief experiences are identical.

5. Long-term
Support should extend beyond the immediate crisis.

6. Consistent
A student's access to support should not depend entirely on which school they attend.

7. Accountable
Policies should have clear responsibilities and measurable outcomes.

8. Collaborative
Schools should work with families and community partners.

9. Respectful
The wishes, privacy and dignity of bereaved families should be considered throughout the response.

10. Prevention-focused
Lessons learned should be used to improve future practice.

APPENDIX B — PROPOSED MEETING QUESTIONS FOR THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

1. What is the board's current protocol when a student dies?
2. Who becomes the family's designated point of contact?
3. How long does that support continue?
4. What specific supports are available to siblings?
5. What grief and traumatic-loss training do principals, teachers, EAs and other school staff receive?
6. How does the board ensure that students affected by a death are followed up with months later?
7. How can a bereaved family provide formal feedback about the board's response?
8. Is there an independent review process when a family has serious concerns?
9. Would the board consider establishing a Bereaved Family & Student Advisory Group?
10. Would the board incorporate grief and traumatic-loss response into its mental-health strategy?
11. What is the board's current policy for transporting students on school-sanctioned trips?
12. When are students transported by school buses, coach buses, staff vehicles or family vehicles?
13. Would the board consider making organized bus transportation the standard for all school-sanctioned trips?
14. What exceptions would be permitted, and who approves them?
15. Which of these recommendations can the board implement independently?
16. Which recommendations require provincial action?
17. Who will be responsible for following up on this proposal?
18. When can I expect a written response?

Closing Statement

I am not asking the school board to undo what happened.

I am asking the board to look honestly at what can be learned from the experiences of grieving families and to use that knowledge to build something better.

My hope is that when another student, another sibling, another classroom and another family experiences an unimaginable loss, they encounter a school system that is prepared.

Prepared to listen.
Prepared to communicate.
Prepared to support.
Prepared to follow up.
Prepared to learn.
And prepared to do better.

Student grief deserves a system that understands it.
Student safety deserves a system that plans for it.
And families deserve a system that is accountable to both.

I would take the full proposal to the meeting, but also bring a one-page executive summary with the 11 reforms and the accountability table. That gives the Director something concrete to keep after the meeting rather than leaving the conversation as a personal story alone.

The transportation recommendation is intentionally worded as a policy proposal for board review, rather than claiming that every coach bus or school bus has identical safety characteristics. The board should establish the vehicle, driver, inspection, insurance, supervision and emergency standards that approved transportation providers must meet. Ontario's existing school-bus guidance establishes specific safety expectations for school buses.

What I Am Asking of the Board Today

1. Review
Review the proposal and current board practices.

2. Respond
Provide a written response identifying which recommendations can be implemented at the board level and which require provincial action.

3. Collaborate
Invite me to participate in the development/review of any resulting student grief, traumatic-loss or transportation policies.

Sources

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