

Considerations for Virtual Adaptations to School Suicide Prevention Policies and Procedures

Comprehensive school-based suicide prevention involves multiple strategies and approaches that span a continuum from awareness and upstream prevention (e.g., school climate, trauma-informed practices, social-emotional learning), to intervention (e.g., screening, assessment, safety planning), to postvention following a death by suicide or other tragic loss. Given that all components of suicide prevention policy and protocols can be understood as part of comprehensive **prevention** efforts, it is important for schools to examine **all** components of existing policy and procedures from a standpoint of remote learning to consider how implementation of such prevention efforts may need to be modified. In the process of reviewing all components, schools should adhere to suicide prevention guidelines (e.g., [safe and effective messaging](#)) and continue to distribute universal resources. Below are some initial guiding questions, followed by action steps for schools to explore as they review and modify implementation of current policies and procedures.

Initial Guiding Questions

The following questions may help guide the prioritization of more immediate action steps for schools:

- What staff member(s) and/or teams (e.g., Suicide Prevention Coordinator, school mental health professionals, SAP or crisis team members, solicitor, IT staff) are available to review existing policies and protocols to determine feasibility in a remote environment?
- What are the current recommendations, guidelines, and resources by national and state governing bodies, suicide prevention organizations, and professional associations that may inform revisions (e.g., [COVID-19 Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Key Messages](#))?
- What is the availability of school staff members and/or school-based crisis response teams to respond given existing intervention protocols and current restrictions?
- Is there a need to engage community partners (e.g., mobile crisis, SAP liaisons, community providers, hospitals) to respond collaboratively or in place of school staff? If so, what is their current capacity to respond, and how are protocols changing moving forward?
- How will information related to health, welfare, and safety (e.g., [suicide warning signs](#), environmental safety, accessing crisis resources) be disseminated?
- What technology is available to support current protocols (e.g., Safe2Say Something, Crisis Text Line) and/or how can technology be utilized to adapt existing protocols?

Action Steps

The following action steps may assist schools in identifying areas in need of review and revision with consideration to how protocols designed for a brick and mortar setting may apply within a virtual or hybrid structure.

1. **Review existing suicide prevention policies and procedures with an equity lens to identify and mitigate disparities regarding access to strategies, supports, and resources, particularly within a virtual or hybrid environment.**
 - ✓ Apply a multi-tiered approach by ensuring connections are in place for **all** students, and that there is opportunity for targeted check-ins with youth that may be at increased risk for suicide.
 - ✓ Determine methods for outreach (e.g., phone call check-ins, in-person visits while maintaining physical distance, utilizing community partners for wellness checks) and consider the diverse needs within the school community, including those of underrepresented groups (e.g., crisis response plans in IEPs, translation of resources).
 - ✓ Explore how additional community partnerships and community-based resources (e.g., faith-based services, homeless shelters, libraries, [LGBTQ+ supports](#), etc.) could be used to

help strengthen protective factors and mitigate existing inequities and risk factors by supplementing school suicide prevention protocols and resources.

- ✓ Identify and determine the ability to address logistical concerns that may pose barriers to communication, confidentiality, documentation, and follow-up (e.g., access to technology, private space, contact information, resources, etc.).

2. Update the suicide prevention supports and resources that can be offered as part of universal prevention and targeted intervention efforts for staff, families, and students.

- ✓ Educate the school community on wellness, risk, and resilience with respect to how observable behaviors of concern may appear within a virtual environment and how to facilitate referrals within the school and community. Emphasize strategies for self-care, support, and advocacy for staff, students, and families whenever possible (e.g., [National Center for School Mental Health](#), [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)).
- ✓ Confirm referral options and processes for the continuum of school and community-based resources and services, including SAP, 302 and crisis response. Determine how availability of resources aligns with **all** components of school suicide prevention policies, including prevention, intervention (i.e., during suicide-related crisis), reentry to school (whether virtual, hybrid, or brick and mortar), and postvention.
- ✓ Utilize resources from national organizations, many of which have local or regional chapters that offer access to a range of supports and advocacy for individuals with lived experience of mental health challenges or suicide risk and those that support them (e.g., [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#), [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)).
- ✓ Explore options for additional technology that can help support universal messaging, reporting, and monitoring of students (e.g., mental health or safety planning apps; local, state, and federal crisis supports).

3. Explore adaptations to internal and external communication, including how to communicate with staff, parents/guardians, and students about suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention policies and procedures within a virtual setting.

- ✓ Establish expectations for general supervision and monitoring during remote learning, including how the level of supervision may need to change when students may be at risk for suicide (e.g., [NASP Conducting a Virtual Suicide Assessment Checklist](#)).
- ✓ Determine how these expectations for supervision and monitoring may impact the school's ability to carry out aspects of existing suicide prevention protocols and how expectations will be communicated to parents/guardians (e.g., does an adult need to be present for a school staff member to conduct a risk screening or assessment?).
- ✓ Evaluate the platforms that are being used to engage with students and families, to identify confidentiality concerns.
- ✓ Acknowledge the limits of confidentiality pertinent to suicide prevention procedures while working remotely and address how to balance student/family privacy with safety, how confidentiality may be compromised, and how information will be shared.
- ✓ Review and update protocols for communication and documentation when there is an immediate safety concern, whether internally with school staff or externally with the parent/guardian or crisis responders.
- ✓ Consider how documentation protocols can be used to support communication and follow-up with students, families, school staff/teams, and external partners (e.g., notifying individuals who may be part of a student's safety plan).

ADDITIONAL KEY RESOURCES

National Resources

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) Resources:

[Comprehensive School Suicide Prevention in a Time of Distance Learning](#)

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (MHTTC) Resources:

[School Mental Health Resources](#)

Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) Resources:

[Suicide Prevention Resources for Schools](#)

Pennsylvania Resources

Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE)

[Act 71 page](#)

[Student and Staff Wellness Guide](#)

Pennsylvania Network for Student Assistance Services (PNSAS)

[Considerations for Tele-Screening/Assessment during COVID-19](#)

Prevent Suicide PA

[Act 71 page](#)

[Adapted Postvention Considerations for Schools](#)

[Mental Health Mobile Applications](#)

University of Pittsburgh Services for Teens at Risk (STAR) Center Resources:

[Postvention Standards Manual, 5th Edition](#)



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