Having Conversations with your Students after a Tragedy

Prepared by the MNPS Trauma-Informed Schools Team

1. Begin by intentionally establishing a **safe space**. This simply means that in the beginning, you as the teacher explicitly state that you (or the classroom community) will provide a safe space for each other to talk about the loss and express feelings or memories.
2. If talking to a classroom, take the time to briefly establish norms such as: be respectful and allow others to express their feelings – or choose to stay quiet and just listen; sharing is completely optional; allow everyone to process grief in their own way (as we all process differently); what we talk about here stays here; or include other guiding norms you choose.
3. Consider beginning class with a moment of silence in the aftermath of a tragic loss.
4. Acknowledge the hurt and the hard truth that something tragic has happened.  Remember and rest assured that **asking, listening, & validating are profound forms of doing.**
5. **Say less.  Listen more.** Let them know it’s OK to talk about it and to ask questions if they want to.
6. When giving students the space to express themselves, just let them talk.  Be a good listener and facilitate but allow the conversation to flow organically.
7. Don't feel the need to have an answer.  It is ok to tell students, "I don't know what to say, but I love you guys."
8. Emphasize to students that the most powerful form of healing comes from **connection**. Clearly communicate you are there for them, and you hope they can be there for one another.
9. Some students will want to talk about it, and some won't.  Be sure to explicitly let students know that whenever they are ready to talk, you are there for them.
10. **Share positive stories**.  Share any you have and encourage students to do the same in an effort to help them make positive meaning.
11. Example language to use:
    1. "It's ok to cry."
    2. "It's ok to feel angry (or any other emotion).”
    3. "I wish I had the right words, but I don't.  Just know that I care."
    4. "I'm here for you."
    5. "You don't have to talk if you're not ready."
12. Things to **avoid saying**:
    1. "I know how you feel."  (*unless you really do*)
    2. "They’re in a better place now."
    3. "There's a reason for everything."
    4. "Everything will be ok."  (Too jarring in the beginning)
    5. "At least" (Avoid starting any statement with this; it minimizes their grief.)