



Grief In The Classroom: 'Saying Nothing Says A Lot'

Deborah Oster Pannell's husband died when her son, Josiah, was 6 years old. That week, Pannell visited Josiah's school and, with his teacher and guidance counselor, explained to his first-grade class what had happened.

"I'll never forget the three of us sitting up there — and all these little shining faces looking up at us — talking about how Josiah lost his dad and he might be sad for a while," Pannell says.

Josiah, who is now 11 years old, has a few painful memories of the visit. "That day they were all just blatantly explaining what had just happened to me," he says. "It was really uncomfortable."

But Josiah also believes the visit helped make his classroom a healthy, safe space for his grieving.

So how should educators handle the death of a student's loved one?

A new website — GrievingStudents.org — is trying to help teachers and school leaders answer that question. It's a database of fact sheets, advice and videos. The materials were produced by the Coalition to Support Grieving Students, a group including 10 national organizations that represent teachers, school administrators and support staff.

Using census data, the group estimates that 1 in 20 children will lose a parent by the time he or she graduates from high school. And that doesn't include the many more kids who will lose a sibling, grandparent or close friend.

Grief is a fact of life in our nation's schools; 7 out of 10 teachers have a student currently in their classroom who is grieving, according to research by the New York Life Foundation and the American Federation of Teachers.

"Virtually all children will go through it — but that doesn't mean it's a normalizing experience," says Dr. David Schonfeld, an expert on student grief and a driving force behind the new website. "Even though it's common, it warrants our attention."

Schonfeld, who founded the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, has seen his share of student grief. He's spent the last decade advising schools on what to do after major tragedies, including Sept. 11 and the mass shootings in Newtown, Conn., and Aurora, Colo.

But Schonfeld is quick to point out: Grief does not require a national tragedy.

"If the person you care about most in your life is dead, that's huge," he says. "For the individual who's experienced a loss, it's infinite, and we have to have that perspective."

Attending to student grief isn't just about creating a more compassionate classroom either.

"Grief can have a tremendous impact on a student's ability to stay on track, stay focused and stay enthusiastic towards school," says Erin Kimble, a social worker at Indianapolis Metropolitan High School in Indiana.

For a grieving student, just showing up at school can be a challenge. And when they do make it to class, Kimble says, some kids' grief can turn to anger, leading to disruptive outbursts.

At Indianapolis Metropolitan, when a student loses a loved one, teachers often come to Kimble first for advice and guidance. "The most common question teachers ask me is, 'How do I have this conversation?'" Kimble says. "The teachers want to know exactly what and what not to say to a student."

And that's the challenge: Most teachers aren't trained social workers. Which is why Luz Minaya welcomes the extra resources. She teaches Spanish and technology at a public middle school in New York City. The 17-year teaching veteran says she received "no training" for how to deal with student grief.

"You go to college and you study to become a teacher. But no one tells you how to deal with the emotional aspect of students," Minaya says.

Her school has a large population of Latino students. Many are very close to their grandparents, Minaya says, and when an elder dies, she's seen that grief affect behavior, attendance and performance.

"Teachers really have a major role in the safeguarding of the student," Minaya says. "I don't want to have to depend on the guidance counselor or wait for the social worker who comes once a week."

'At Least'

The Coalition's new site includes lots of guidance for teachers that's refreshingly specific, like this: Avoid comparisons. Saying "my father died, too" shifts attention to a competing loss and away from the grieving student.

Also, avoid trying to comfort a student with any sentence that begins with "at least." Educators shouldn't try to make light of the situation or find good in the sad, says Schonfeld.

The teacher's goal should be to support grieving students by making clear to them that they are safe and have someone to talk to.

And it's a long-term process, not just a one-day or one-month challenge. Five years after his father died, Josiah had trouble transitioning to middle school this year.

"The grief hasn't gone away, so I'm just waiting for it to calm down — like a volcano," Josiah says.

And, as he waits, year after year, his teachers will learn of Josiah's loss and they will struggle to find the right words, the right approach. For educators, these new resources represent a challenge and an opportunity.

"Saying nothing says a lot," Schonfeld says, "and that's a message we should never leave a child."