



ATLAS Multi Academy Trust

Guidance note: COVID 19 - Bereavement

(to be read in conjunction with the ATLAS Parental and Partner Bereavement Policy)

1.	INTRODUCTION Bereavement during coronavirus presents a special set of challenges. The Trust needs to be able to respond to death in a virtual space. Guidance has been sought though Winston's Wish and Child Bereavement UK who advised The Key on this subject. We've also relied on information from Cruse Bereavement Care .
2.	COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY On a case by case basis consideration will be given on how the Trust will communicate remotely while: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Remaining sensitive to the needs of our staff• Protecting the privacy of the affected staff member/pupil and their family• Controlling the potential spread of rumours The Trust will also consider when to communicate with pupils and parents. <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The Trust will not share news of a staff member's or a pupil's serious illness with anyone outside of staff. This is to prevent undue anxiety and to maintain confidentiality. Exceptions to this would be if:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ The local health protection team has instructed you to contact pupils/parents for public health reasons○ News has already spread through social media (see the section below on what to do if social media is ahead of us)2. You will share news of a staff member's or pupil's death with the school community as soon as possible in order to facilitate healthy grieving. This is the advice shared by Child Bereavement UK and Winston's Wish, which support children through bereavement Keep in mind that there's no perfect way to do this, and much of the detail will depend on the culture of your school. Note: we're using the name 'John' in the sections below to illustrate the person who is seriously ill/has died. This person may be a pupil or member of staff. The process is primarily the same, and any differences are clearly marked.

Communication about serious illness

1. Contact the family

The headteacher or other senior leader should make this difficult phone call. It might be useful to have some notes prepared ahead of time. For example:

- Acknowledge what's happened – "I'm so sorry to hear that John's taken ill."
 - Don't be afraid to ask how serious the illness is – you need an understanding of what's happened so you can support the staff appropriately
- Express support on behalf of the school – "I'm calling to let you know that we're here for you and for John and to see if there's anything we can do to help."
 - Explain what resources you have available for support, e.g. a crisis team
 - If this involves a staff member, agree a point of contact for administrative issues and questions related to pay, benefits, etc.
- Discuss how to share the news with the staff and the rest of the school community – "We'll need to let John's colleagues/teachers know what's happened. They'll be heartbroken about this, and we need to let them know that we'll be there to support them."
- Find out how often you can ask for updates – "We know this is an incredibly difficult time and we don't want to be a burden. John's colleagues/teachers will be very anxious for updates. How often can I contact you to see how he's doing?"

Take the following steps in line with what you've agreed with the family (for example, regarding how much information they're happy for you to share and who with, and whether/how they wish to be contacted with messages of support and get-well wishes).

2. Contact the staff members who are closest to John

The headteacher or a senior member of staff should make these calls. This is terrible news to have to share, so use your judgement in identifying those staff members who will have the most difficult time hearing this and reach out to them first by phone or video call.

- Be direct about what's happened – "I have some terrible news. John is seriously ill and has been admitted to hospital."
- Let that staff member know that you haven't told the whole staff yet and ask for their discretion until you've done so – "I wanted to let you know first because I knew how hard this would be for you and I wanted to give you some time to absorb the news. I'd be grateful if you kept this upsetting news to yourself until we've told the rest of the staff."

3. Contact the rest of the staff

If you're a small enough school, it might be possible to tell the entire staff at once by calling a video conference. If you're a larger school, it'll be more practical to enlist the senior leadership team to communicate across teams.

- Be direct about what's happened – "I have some terrible news. John is seriously ill and has been admitted to hospital."

- Let the staff know that you'll keep them updated, but manage their expectations – "I know this news will make you anxious, and we'll let you know just as soon as we have anything new to report. Please remember that John's family is going through a really difficult time right now, especially since they can't go to the hospital to be with him. We'll check in with the family as frequently as they want us to, but it won't be every day and maybe not even every week."
- Acknowledge staff members' concerns, not just for the health of their colleague or pupil but also for themselves – "You're all worried about John, I know, and I'm sure you're also very concerned about yourselves and your families. Some of you have been working with John recently, and you'd be right to be worried that you've been exposed. I'm worried about you, too. Remember that if you're not showing symptoms, government guidelines say it's safe for you to keep working but please come and talk to me if you want to discuss this further."

4. Send a follow-up email

It's difficult to absorb information when we receive shocking news. We've all had that experience where we've learned something devastating and everything that happens after is a blur. That's why it's important to follow up in writing to:

- Reassure staff that you'll update them as often as possible, but explain that this might not be as often as they hope
- Include information relevant to your risk assessments related to self-isolation, testing, etc.
- Remind staff about what emotional support they can access, e.g. HR or occupational health, helplines, etc.

3. What to do if social media is ahead of the school

If you're aware of speculation on social media or through word of mouth and need to address this urgently before you'll have a chance to speak to staff directly, use the template available below to send out some initial information. This email should be brief and provide just enough information to dispel any harmful rumours until you can brief staff properly and 'in person' over phone or video conference.

Dear colleagues,

I'm aware that there are rumours circulating that [name] is [seriously ill/has died].

I will be bringing you all together so I can tell you about [name]'s circumstances, but I wanted to address these rumours quickly, before they cause any more harm. I can confirm [insert minimum details necessary to address rumours].

We've been in contact with the family to express how sad we are about this news and to offer our support. Understandably, the family is still coming to terms with what's happening and appreciates having some privacy for now.

I know that this will come as quite a shock to some of you. Please join me at [enter the time and video conferencing or telephone details] so we can share the information that we do have and support each other through this difficult time.

We're all going to get through this together. Thank you for your help and understanding at this difficult time.

[Sign off]

<p>4.</p>	<p>Balancing confidentiality with the need for transparency</p> <p>What you share and with whom will be led by what you've agreed with the affected person or their family. In the vast majority of cases, they won't object to you sharing some details about their loved one's illness or death.</p> <p>But it's also possible that they'll ask you not to share details or even news of the illness or death altogether. If so, you'll need to tread carefully. You'll have to make a judgement call and find a balance between respecting the family's wishes and supporting your staff and pupils.</p> <p>If news of the illness or death has already spread through the school via social media or word of mouth, you may need to tell the family respectfully that you believe at least some disclosure is called for in order to prevent unfounded rumours and harmful speculation. In those cases, explain what you're going to share and why.</p> <p>If the illness or death is the result of a contagion such as coronavirus, your duty of care extends beyond the affected staff member to the safety of everyone in your school. The Information Commissioner's Office advises that you tell your staff (as well as anyone else who may have had contact with the affected person), though you don't have to mention them by name.</p>
<p>5.</p>	<p>Supporting Staff from a distance</p> <p>You may not be able to put your normal school bereavement strategy into action right now, but there's still plenty you can do to support grieving staff. It's very similar to what you'd do under normal circumstances, but in a virtual space.</p> <p>Talking to staff about loss</p> <p>You probably know how to respond to grief when it's in the same room with you: sit with the person, hold their hand, rub their back, and just be present.</p> <p>But doing the same over the phone or through a video chat, where you're confronting grief from a distance and have nothing to offer but words, will be a different experience. You might be naturally tempted to fill the space with words. So before that happens, take a moment to reflect:</p> <p>DO</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be caring and compassionate • Offer your condolences • Let them know that work comes second at this time • Be conscious of diversity – don't assume that someone else shares your beliefs <p>DON'T</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignore the situation • Assume you know how the bereaved person feels • Say anything that minimises the loss, such as 'we all have to go sometime' or 'she had some good innings' • Make light of the bereavement, such as 'time heals all wounds' or 'you have to be strong now'

The above, along with more dos and don'ts, can be found on [Cruse Bereavement Care's website](#).

Recognise that grieving is different right now

Every community in the world marks death by coming together to observe funeral rites, and that process is severely disrupted right now. It's possible that someone's inability to see a body or attend a funeral can lead to a sense of disbelief that the death has actually occurred.

This can delay grief, so someone can appear unaffected for some time until reality hits. On a practical level, this means you should:

- **Check in with bereaved staff regularly**, even if they say that they're fine – let them know you're there to listen and let them lead the conversation
- **Ask if they need some time off**, but don't push it – if funerals and memorial services are delayed, staff may prefer to carry on with working for now and take time off later. Or grief itself may be delayed and it might take some time for reality to hit. Let them know that you'll be flexible about when staff can take bereavement leave
- **Signpost to any support that's available to them** through your school's bereavement team or your local authority's or trust's HR department

Provide a virtual space for staff to come together in grief

It's said that 'grief shared is halved'. Grief is communal, and sharing grief is a necessary part of recovery. Attendance at funerals is limited to immediate family right now, so rituals can take on even more significance when we can't come together to mourn.

- **Hold a virtual memorial service** – this can be as formal or informal as suits your school community
- **Create a memorial page** – you can do this on your school website, or set up a page with e.g. Google Site or WordPress (make sure this is only accessible to your school community)

Of course, grieving is a process rather than an event, so ongoing support is vital. See this article for more tips on [how to take care of your teams remotely](#).