



Youth Bereavement Support in Public Schools

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The lack of youth grief support in schools is a societal problem that has been highly disregarded. Because grief is not seen as a mental health “condition”, insurance will not cover it, schools will not provide support, and families in underserved areas are unable to assist their struggling children who need help. This brief will cover the impact of the lack of bereavement resources in schools and how the gap can be closed with policy.

II. OVERVIEW

1 in 12 American children will experience the death of a parent or sibling by the time they come of age. Consequently, approximately 6 million American children are dealing with grief at any given time. Despite these statistics, grief counseling is not an educational or political priority among legislators or school officials. There are no federal or state mandates requiring the implementation of grief counseling programs in education. Given the current administration’s pedagogical priorities, the expansion of such programming is unlikely—funding provided for mental health services under Title IV-A is already threatened by the potential closure of the Department of Education. If remanded entirely to the states, longstanding disparities in the availability of grief counseling and mental health

services will likely widen. Nevertheless, the fate of grief counseling in the American education system does not and need not rely entirely on federal coffers. This paper will explore the history of grief counseling support in the American education system before assessing the effectiveness of various policy options and making holistic recommendations to ensure that American students have equitable access to the grief counseling resources they deserve. In the end, this paper argues that with smart municipal planning, the careful management of public private partnerships, and strategic investment in mental health services, states and school boards can construct flexible, adaptable, and sustainable models of grief support.

A. Relevance

In light of today’s youth mental health crisis, grief support is no longer a peripheral issue. Grieving children attending under-resourced schools in underserved communities are disproportionately affected, and their families are often unable to pay for counseling or other forms of grief support. Furthermore, schools are not legally mandated to provide grief support in any capacity, so access, even in wealthy areas, is never guaranteed. Even when it is available, programs are often reactive, decentralized, underfunded, and unregulated, ensuring that there is no consistent baseline for the quality or effectiveness of services offered.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

The history of grief support is inextricably tied to the history of mental health services in the United States, as well as the social ideologies that govern mental health policy and practice. Broadly, mental health wasn't considered to be an educational issue until the mid-twentieth century. Before this, schools were intended to instill discipline and prepare students with only those critical and behavioral skills necessary to fulfill their duties as workers and citizens. The duties to ensure the students' moral education and mental well being were assigned to the household, far outside the scope of formal educational institutions. Understanding this early pedagogy is critical to understanding the conservative view of education, which holds that education should be narrowly focused around economic preparation and civic participation.

Regardless, pedagogical views of mental health shifted in the mid-to-late 20th century alongside more modern developments in educational theory and clinical psychology. Psychologists such as Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and J. William Worden suggested that grief was a sociological process shaped by institutional priority and practice, not just an isolated emotional response. In this light, educators began to emphasize the inclusion of grief and emotional well-being in educational practice, which schools had historically failed to emphasize.

Nevertheless, currently no states mandate any form of bereavement support. A 2022 study from

the New York Life Foundation and the American Federation of Teachers reports that 92% of teachers reported the presence of a grieving student in their classroom, however, only 15% of educators felt they had the resources to properly assist them.

Other states that strongly emphasize mental health in education don't fare much better. Despite an estimated 626,000 grieving children, grief support within California schools remains discrepant at best. While some public schools in the state offer minimal counseling services, the presence of grief resources remains heavily dependent on a school's funding and region. Although it recently launched one of the most comprehensive public-private grief support partnerships in the nation, Oregon still lacks both statewide mandates and consistent delivery. Across the board, youth in underserved communities have access to effectively no formal resources in their schools, and they are often too poor to afford external help. The absence of stable funding and access leaves children to suffer through their grief alone, damaging their mental health, personal relationships, and academic performance.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

It is a given that the primary stakeholders are grieving children with little or no access to grief resources, especially those in underserved communities. However, the effects of grief are not confined to the bereaved— friends, families, schools, neighborhoods, and entire communities will feel the weight of loss through its ripple

effects. Therefore, every member of society, from the children themselves to surviving family, friends, neighbors, teachers, law enforcement, healthcare providers, district officials, and governmental representatives, has a stake in supporting our grieving children.

B. Risks of Indifference

Failing to provide grief support in schools does not only leave students to suffer alone: the long term consequences are devastating. Because grieving students are more likely to fall behind, experience a wide range of mental health challenges, and struggle with peer relationships, they are at a significantly higher risk of dropping out, developing severe behavioral issues, and becoming overly reliant on public systems. These effects ripple outward. Communities that cannot support their grieving students must wrestle with cycles of intergenerational trauma, poverty, educational inequity, and criminality, among many other indicators that destroy our individual quality of life and communal cohesion.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Because grief is a universal human experience, it affects students, families, and communities across all backgrounds, income levels, and political affiliations. Supporting grieving children is therefore not a partisan issue, it's a shared responsibility. The benefits of such nonpartisan intervention include, but are not limited to, the following:

- 1) **Alignment with Conservative and Progressive Values:** Grief support upholds the core principles of both major political ideologies. Republicans and conservatives strongly believe in the power of a stable family group; grief counseling allows entire families to grow closer and heal

together, developing both resilience and independence in the process. Democrats and progressives advocate for systemic reform meant to bring about social justice and societal compassion. By supporting grieving children, we are empowering them to dismantle cycles of trauma and barriers to mental health care. Because grief affects everyone, it is inherently bipartisan.

- 2) **Improved Mental Health and Educational Outcomes:** Supporting grieving children through school-based resources improves mental health outcomes, classroom performance, and long-term stability—outcomes both parties aim to achieve through their respective platforms. Ultimately, grief support helps every student thrive, no matter where they come from or what they believe. However, to gain full political support, policy proposals must be framed in a way that aligns with each party's core values.
- 3) **Moral and Economic Imperatives:** Providing grief support in schools is not only compassionate, it's cost-effective. Research consistently shows that unaddressed grief in childhood can incur severe long-term costs by increasing societal demand for mental health services, law enforcement for both juveniles and adults, educational oversight, welfare, and other forms of public aid. Implementing proactive grief counseling services therefore reduces the burden on both public health and education systems over time. For fiscal conservatives, this is a smart use of existing infrastructure; for progressives, it's a clearly necessary social

good. Either way, it's a pragmatic investment with bipartisan benefits.

V. TRIED POLICY

More states are becoming aware of the importance of grief support, as evinced by recent efforts to institute formal grief counseling services in educational institutions. Passed amid surging fatalities due to the COVID Pandemic in 2021, New Jersey's "Grief Bill" (A5019) mandates that schools incorporate grief training into their broader educator training programs and provide "age appropriate" grief support resources to grieving students. Similarly, Oregon has recently launched state-funded public private partnerships (PPPs) between school systems and grief centers in an effort to make counseling services more readily available to students in need.

Despite these efforts, most policies remain underdeveloped and undefined, with grief counseling generally only being offered or mandated implicitly, if at all, by broader mental health initiatives.

California's Student-Based Family Counseling program, for instance, offers perfunctory grief support on an as-needed basis, but this is a reactive approach that lacks either standardization or structure. Generally, California schools rely on the services offered by third-party nonprofits or hospitals, such as the The Elizabeth Hospice in San Diego, but such reliance leads to patchwork coverage and creates bereavement deserts.

The gaps are even wider at the federal level. Currently, there are no Department of Education mandates that even mention grief in any form,

and neither are there any Congressional bills offering any form of federal guidance or oversight. Effectively, grief as a policy issue has been entirely remanded to the states, few of whom are incentivized to take legislative action despite the magnitude of the issue at hand. Private educational institutions and nonprofits like the Coalition to Support Grieving Students and the New York Life Foundation have attempted to fill in the care and visibility gaps by developing guidelines, toolkits, and recommended standards, but none of these models have been adopted outside of regions that already have access to grief counseling resources for children.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

Integration of Grief Education into School Curriculum

Grief is a universal experience, yet it remains largely unaddressed in local school curricula. Without early education on grief, students are left to navigate incredible loss alone, often internalizing negative emotions and struggling immensely both academically and socially. By integrating age-appropriate grief education into health and wellness units across K–12, educators can help students develop emotional literacy, empathy, and coping strategies before a personal loss ever occurs. These initiatives should be overseen and funded by both state departments and local school boards, using vetted resources from child bereavement organizations to ensure that grief is framed as a natural human process, not a clinical condition.

On-Campus Peer Support Groups for Grieving Students

Students who are grieving often feel isolated in their experiences. Peer support groups offer a safe space for young people to connect with others who understand their experiences. These groups should be facilitated by school counselors or trained peer leaders with oversight from mental health professionals and organizations. Ideally, groups would meet regularly, perhaps weekly or bi-weekly, and follow a guided but flexible curriculum, able to adapt to the individual needs of students while still providing structured support. To minimize prototyping costs, pilot programs should be launched in districts with high levels of community trauma or loss, then gradually expand statewide. Funding would be secured through existing wellness grants or new allocations under various mental health initiatives.

Dedicated School Grief Liaison or Mental Health Advocate

Many schools lack a point person trained specifically in child bereavement. By assigning a grief liaison to each school or district, grieving students and their families would have direct access to support, resources, and referrals. This individual would also ensure that teachers and staff are equipped with trauma-informed practices and can recognize when students are struggling. A school grief liaison could be an existing counselor with additional certification or a new hire funded by mental health expansion grants. The role would also include maintaining community partnerships with local grief centers and nonprofits to offer external support services,

thereby providing students with a robust community support network.

Scaling Service Accessibility: From Local to Federal Integration

Ideally, federal and state curriculum standards would directly mandate the availability of grief counseling resources. But given the current political landscape, the smart use of public private partnerships and integration of preexisting grief services into schools at the grassroots level is the most feasible policy solution. From there, district officials, nonpartisan educational organizations, and other community stakeholders have the power to lay the foundations for state recognition and federal change. By training educators, meeting student needs, and tracking their results, they can demonstrate the necessity, effectiveness, and economic viability of grief support services, thereby making the case for first state and later federal support.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Despite the legislative invisibility of mental health in the US, we cannot afford to continue ignoring the millions of grieving children in our country. There is simply too much at stake—when left unattended, grief destroys our emotional health and wreaks havoc on academic performance, social engagement, and communal well being. Nevertheless, in our current policy landscape, access to critical grief support resources remains almost entirely dependent on geography, political convenience, funding availability, and dumb luck. We must act to change this, and reforms must occur at every level of our society—local, state, and federal. If we are ever to achieve equity, either in

education or society, it begins by giving every student in every community the opportunity to grieve, to learn, and ultimately, to heal.

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