



## Mount Sackville Secondary School

*"Ours is not to reap the harvest, ours is just to sow the seed"*  
Blessed Anne-Marie Javouhey

# Mount Sackville Secondary School

## Critical Incident Plan

### Introduction

In keeping with the School Ethos, Mount Sackville Secondary School aims to protect the wellbeing of its students and staff by providing a safe and nurturing environment at all times.

This policy refers to the response taken by this school should a critical incident occur.

The staff and management of Mount Sackville Secondary School have formulated a number of policies and procedures to be followed with a view to ensuring the physical and psychological safety of both staff and students, and the creation of a supportive and caring ethos in the school, in ordinary time as well as in the event of a critical incident. Such policies include the school's Admissions Policy; the school's RSE policy; the school's Child Protection Policy; the Anti-Bullying Policy; the Health and Safety Policy and the school's Code of Behaviour. The staff and management have established a Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT) to steer the development and implementation of this plan.

### Definition of a critical incident

The staff and management of Mount Sackville Secondary School recognise a critical incident to be "an incident or sequence of events that overwhelms the normal coping mechanism of the school." Critical incidents may involve one or more students or staff members or members of our local community.

Critical Incidents of their very nature tend to occur without warning and at any time of the day or night. This policy provides guidance for those whose task it is to manage such incidents. However, each crisis situation will demand a different set of responses.

Types of incidents might include but are not limited to:



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- The death of a member of the school community through accident, violence, suicide or suspected suicide or other unexpected death
- An intrusion into the school
- An accident involving members of the school community
- An accident/tragedy in the wider school community
- Serious damage to the school building through fire, flood, vandalism, etc
- The disappearance of a member of the school community
- Family bereavement
- Serious emergency on school premises
- Serious violence or the threat of serious violence to a member of the school community either within or outside the school
- Serious injury or death of a student while involved in a school activity

### Aim

The aim of the Critical Incident Plan is to help school management and staff to react quickly and effectively in the event of an incident, to enable them to maintain a sense of control and to ensure that appropriate support is offered to students and staff. Having a good plan should also help ensure that the effects on the students and staff will be limited. It should enable us to effect a return to normality as soon as possible.

### Creation of a coping supportive and caring ethos in the school

We have put systems in place to help to build resilience in both staff and students, thus preparing them to cope with a range of life events. These include measures to address both the physical and psychological safety of the school community.

#### 1. Physical safety

Some of the measures taken by the school to ensure the physical safety of the students include:

- Evacuation plan formulated and clearly visible in each room



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- Regular fire drills occur
- Fully functional and regularly serviced Fire Alarm System
- Fire exits and extinguishers are regularly checked
- Health and Safety Plan (and rules) for all practical rooms and laboratories
- Supervision in the school before and after school and during all breaks
- Scheduled First Aid providers
- Induction for all new students and staff

### 2. Psychological safety

The management and staff of Mount Sackville Secondary School aim to use available programmes and resources to address the personal and social development of students, to enhance a sense of safety and security in the school and issues and to provide opportunities for reflection and discussion.

Some of the measures taken by the school to ensure the psychological wellbeing of the students include:

- Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is integrated into the work of the school. It is addressed in the curriculum by addressing issues such as grief and loss; communication skills; stress and anger management; resilience; conflict management; problem solving; help-seeking; bullying; decision making and alcohol and drug prevention. Promotion of mental health is included in this provision.
- Staff will have access to training for their role in SPHE.
- Staff are familiar with the Child Protection Guidelines and Procedures and details of how to proceed with suspicions or disclosures are familiar to all staff.
- Annual Wellbeing Week
- Information session on mental health
- The school has a designated tutor time in which class tutors are available to listen to the concerns of students in their care and respond accordingly. Their dean is also available.



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- Inputs to students by external providers are carefully considered in the light of criteria about student safety, the appropriateness of the content, and the expertise of the providers.
- The school has a clear policy on bullying and deals with bullying in accordance with this policy.
- There is a care system in place in the school. The Student Support Team comprised of the Chaplain, Guidance Counsellor and the learning Support Coordinator, meet regularly to review provision of pastoral care and to address specific cases.
- Students who are identified as being at risk are referred to the Student Support Team where concerns are explored and the appropriate level of assistance and support is provided. Where appropriate, a referral is made to an appropriate agency.
- Staff are informed about how to access support for themselves.

### Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT)

A CIMT has been established in line with best practice. The members of the team were selected on a voluntary basis and will retain their roles for at least one school year. The members of the team will meet annually to review and update the policy and plan. Each member of the team has a dedicated critical incident folder. This contains a copy of the policy and plan and materials particular to their role, to be used in the event of an incident. Each member of the team has been assigned a key role in line with best practice.

The members of the CIMT are:

- Principal
- Deputy Principal
- Guidance Counsellor
- Chaplain
- Year Head
- Tutor
- AEN Coordinator





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- PA to the Principal
- School Secretary
- The Critical Incident Management Team may co-opt other members of staff to assist them, should they deem it necessary.

### Roles

The Principal will act as Team Leader or in her absence the Deputy Principal. The key roles are as follows:

- Team leader
- Garda liaison
- Staff liaison
- Student liaison
- Agency liaison
- Parent/Guardian liaison
- Community liaison
- Communications Officer
- Attendance Tracker
- Administrator

Outlined below are some of the key responsibilities of each role:

#### **Team leader: (Principal)**

- Alerts the team members to the crisis and convenes a meeting
- Coordinates the tasks of the team
- Liaises with the Board of Management; DES; NEPS; SEC;
- Liaises with the bereaved family

#### **Garda liaison: (Principal/Deputy Principal)**

- Liaises with the Gardaí







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- Ensures that information about deaths is checked out before being shared

### **Staff liaison: (Principal)**

Leads briefing meetings for staff on the facts as known, gives staff members an opportunity to express their feelings and ask questions, outlines the routine for the day

- Advises staff on the procedures for identification of vulnerable students
- Provides materials for staff if required
- Keeps staff updated as day progresses
- Is alert to vulnerable staff members and makes contact with them individually. Advises them of availability of counselling services and gives them the contact number.

### **Student liaison: (Student Support Team)**

- Co-ordinate information from tutors and year heads about students they are concerned about
- Alerts other staff to vulnerable students (appropriately)
- Provides materials for students, if required
- Keeps records of students seen by external agency staff
- Looks after setting up and supervision of a quiet area, if needed, such as prayer room

### **Agency liaison: (Student Support)**

- Maintains up to date lists of contact numbers of emergency support services and other external contacts and resources
- Liaises with agencies in the community for support and onward referral
- Is alert to need to check credentials of individuals offering support
- Coordinates the involvement of these agencies
- Updates team members on the involvement of external agencies



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### **Parent/Guardian liaison: (Principal, Chaplain, Student Support)**

- Visits the bereaved family with the team leader
- Arranges parent meetings, if held
- May facilitate such meetings, and manage 'questions and answers'
- Ensures that sample letters are typed up, on the school's system and ready for adaptation
- Sets up room for meetings with parents/guardians
- Maintains a record of parents/ guardians seen
- Meets with individual parents/ guardians
- Provides appropriate materials for parents /guardians if needed

### **Community liaison: (Student Support)**

- Maintains an up-to-date list of contact names and numbers for local community organisations
- Ensures that accurate information is provided to local community groups who are linked in with the school
- Liaises with organisations in the community for support
- Provides information on an on-going basis where appropriate

### **Communications Officer: (Principal)**

- In advance of an incident, will consider issues that may arise and how they might be responded to (e.g. students being interviewed, photographers on the premises, etc)
- Will draw up press statement, give media briefings and interviews (as agreed by school management)
- Will coordinate the monitoring of communications relating to the incident.

### **Administrator: School Secretary**

- Maintenance of up-to-date telephone numbers of Parents or Guardians, Teachers, Emergency support services





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- Takes telephone calls and notes those that need to be responded to
- Ensures that templates are on the school's system in advance and ready for adaptation.
- Prepares and sends out letters, emails and faxes
- Photocopies materials needed
- Maintains records

### **Attendance tracking: Dean of Year**

- In the immediate aftermath of the critical incident special care will be paid to attendance of students.
- All absences will be carefully monitored.

### **Record keeping: (CIMT-all members)**

In the event of an incident each member of the team will keep records of phone calls made and received, letters sent and received, meetings held, persons met, interventions used, material used etc.

## **Procedures to be followed in the event of a critical incident occurring**

### **1. Hearing the news**

Once a critical incident comes to the attention of a member of the school community, he/she should, where possible and practical, inform the senior management of the school. However, where it is apparent that an emergency situation exists, it may be necessary to call one or other of the emergency services in the first instance.

### **2. Establish the facts**

Before taking any action, it is crucial that the school has the correct information regarding the crisis. Therefore, it is important that senior management and involved staff gather to establish the facts – this may involve contacting Hospitals, Gardai, Emergency / Medical Services, Parents/Guardians, etc.





## Mount Sackville Secondary School

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### 3. Informing the Chairperson of the Board of Management

As soon as is practical, the Chairperson of the Board of Management should be informed and it will be the responsibility of the Chairperson to decide whether an emergency meeting of the Board is necessary. Whether or not to close the school will depend on the judgment of the Chairperson and the Principal. Should it be decided to close the school, it is advisable to do so ONLY after informing the students both of the details of the incident and of the routine that the school will follow over the coming days.

### 4. Senior Management to convene a meeting of the critical incident team

Once the facts of the crisis have been established, a meeting of available members of the Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT) should be called. This group will need to agree an immediate plan of action, which may involve:

- Informing staff and students – where feasible all staff should be informed in the first instance
- Contacting parents/guardians
- Visiting families most intimately touched by the crisis
- Organising a school assembly
- Liaising with relevant support groups – Counsellors, HSE, NEPS, DES, SEC etc.
- Agreeing a factual and sensitive statement with regard to the crisis – with a view to dispelling rumours while not adding to the distress of those involved or invading their privacy
- Assigning tasks to members of the Critical Incident Team as outlined above
- Organising a timetable for the school to respond to the crisis – wherever possible adhering to normal timetables and routines – while avoiding any signs of insensitivity to those touched most intimately by the crisis
- Where a funeral is involved and the school proposes to be involved in the funeral in some way, it will be necessary to liaise with the bereaved family regarding any such involvement; it should not be automatically assumed that the family will be happy to



## Mount Sackville Secondary School

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go along with whatever the school decides. Indeed, any public actions on the part of the school at the time of any such a bereavement should be discussed with the bereaved or their representatives before being embarked upon

- Organising a staff meeting and deciding whether or not an outside professional will be invited to that meeting. Where students are going to be in the school, it is critical that appropriate supervision be put in a place for all students whose teachers or supervisors maybe involved in meetings

### 5. Staff meeting

All staff (including support staff) should be invited to the meeting. The following matters should be addressed by the meeting:

- A sensitive account of the facts as known, having regard for the privacy of those involved in the incident. Information needs to be provided on a need-to-know basis
- The views and feelings of staff
- How, by whom and in what setting students and other members of the school community should be informed of the incident
- An outline of the timetable that the Critical Incident Team has drawn up for responding to the crisis – the timetable may, if necessary and feasible, be amended at this meeting
- Details regarding the outside agencies that have been contacted and the support programme that will be put in place for staff, students and other members of the school community
- Procedure for identifying vulnerable students

### 6. Informing students

It is important that all those needing to be informed of the incident receive the necessary information as soon as is practicable. In the course of preparing to inform students, the following matters should be taken into account.

- It will be helpful if a common statement is agreed before students are informed.



## Mount Sackville Secondary School

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- Consideration should be given to providing those delegated the task of informing students with an agreed statement. But, of course, each person will have his/her own way of relating to his/her group of students.
- If at all possible, all students should be told at the same time in class groups no larger than normal class size.
- The ideal person to inform a group of students is someone who knows them well and has their trust. Where a member of staff indicates that he/she would be uncomfortable undertaking the task of informing a group of students, his/her view should be respected.
- Indeed, where a member of staff feels, for whatever reason, that he/she is unable to be involved in the school's direct response to a serious trauma, he/she should be allowed to opt out readily.
- Clear unambiguous information (the facts as they are known) will reduce the spread of rumour. However, it is important to recognise that everyone does not have to be given full details of the event. Again, information needs to be provided on a need-to-know basis.
- Details of a critical incident will obviously need to be communicated to a group of students in a sensitive manner and those informing a group of students should check the list of those they are informing carefully and note if there are any students in the group who are likely to be more seriously affected by the information than others.
- Those informing students of the details of the incident should spend a reasonable amount of time with the students to allow them to react to news of the incident.
- Where news of the death of a member of the school community is being communicated to students, it should be acknowledged that young and old will all find it difficult to cope with the sad news and that support will be provided through the Guidance Counsellors, NEPS and other support services.
- The statement should highlight the support that will be available to students in respect of the incident – both in the immediate and longer term.
- Where a clear plan of action has been agreed in respect of the incident this should be conveyed to the students. Where a plan is in the process of being prepared the



## Mount Sackville Secondary School

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students should also be advised of this and of the time/date that they may expect to be advised of the details of such a plan.

- In the case of a suspected suicide, great care should be taken not to use the term "suicide" until it has been established categorically that the student's death was as a result of suicide. Even then, it is important to respect the privacy and sensitivity of the deceased's family and friends.

### 7. Where an accident has occurred on a school activity/trip

Different situations will call for different responses but the following points should be considered:

- The preparation of a clear statement to assist those contacting the relatives of those who have been injured or affected by the incident.
- It is preferable to have a group of people involved so that all concerned are informed in or around the same time.
- Those contacted should be offered as much practical help as possible – transport, phone numbers, relevant contact persons and other resources
- Those contacting the most affected by the incident should check to see if the contacted are on their own and therefore in need of support.
- Ideally, the most seriously affected should be spoken to face to face rather than by phone.
- The communication should contain some element which allows the person conveying it to check that it has been fully understood.

### 8. Liaising with the press

It is important that the school plan for the distinct possibility that the media will enquire about the incident, by nominating one person only to act as the spokesperson. In preparing a press statement the following issues need to be considered:



## Mount Sackville Secondary School

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- Priority should be given to the sensitivities and needs of those affected directly by the incident.
- The names, addresses and phone numbers of those affected by the crisis should not routinely be provided to the media.
- Statements should be confined to the facts as known.
- Give some thought, in advance, to the kinds of question that the media are likely to ask. Where possible and practical, seek the advice of someone who has experience in dealing with the media prior to talking to the media.
- Understand that the media are not necessarily the enemy. Reporters also have a job to do and the public is entitled to information that neither impinges on the privacy of those affected by the incident nor exacerbates the incident.
- Do not feel that you have to answer a question from a reporter simply because it is asked. Where there is good reason for not answering a question, the reporter should be informed politely that you do not wish to answer it.
- Agree a specific time and place for media briefings – either on a once-off or on-going basis.
- A Press Statement should be simple and brief. It should, where appropriate, express the sorrow of the entire school community at the sudden death of one of their members and it should extend sympathy to the bereaved family. Again, other than where there is a clear need to do otherwise, the statement should be adhered to –and not elaborated on – in all communications with the media and it should be familiar to every member of the school staff.

### 9. Others to be informed

Others will need to be informed of the incident in due course.

- Parent Body: As soon as is practical, all parents should be informed in writing of all relevant details of the incident-again on a need-to-know basis. The correspondence to parents should also provide clear information in respect of the following: how the school proposes to respond to the incident in the short, medium and long term, and





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how parents may assist both their own sons/daughters and other students in recovering from any trauma that the incident may have caused them.

- School Insurers: Some incidents may require the school to inform their insurers.

### Confidentiality and good name considerations

The management and staff of Mount Sackville Secondary School have a responsibility to protect the privacy and good name of the people involved in any incident and will be sensitive to the consequences of any public statements.

The members of the school staff will bear this in mind, and will seek to ensure that students do so also.

For instance, the term 'suicide' will not be used unless there is solid information that death was due to suicide, and that the family involved consents to its use. The phrases 'tragic death' or 'sudden death' may be used instead. Similarly, the word 'murder' should not be used until it is legally established that a murder was committed. The term 'violent death' may be used instead.

### Critical incident rooms

In the event of a critical incident:

- Staff Room will be the main room used to meet the staff,
- The Meeting room and the Chaplain and Guidance offices will be used for meetings with students,
- Meeting room for parents/guardians
- Board Room for press
- Guidance and Chaplain's Office for individual sessions with students
- Meeting room for other visitors
- Prayer room or Library for a "quiet" space for students



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### School Tours and Trips

In the case of School Tours, the Tour Leader will compile an information pack to include:

- Name of the Tour Leader
- A list of all participating teachers and students
- A list of mobile phone numbers for all participating teachers and students
- Passport details (in the case of tours outside the country)
- Photographs of participating students
- Home contact numbers and mobiles of all involved
- Relevant medical information on students and permission forms from parents/guardians in case of a medical emergency
- Insurance details
- Copy of itinerary

A copy of this file should be left with the Principal prior to departure.

### Critical Incident Debriefing

As soon as is practicable after the core elements of the crisis (critical incident) have ended, the school will take every reasonable step to provide all members of the school community, who were most deeply affected by the incident/crisis, with an opportunity to participate in a critical incident debriefing programme.

Furthermore, Mount Sackville Secondary School will seek to persuade those who may be reticent about taking part in such a programme of the advantages of taking part in it.



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### Conclusion

While it is hoped that this policy will be of assistance in the event of a crisis occurring in our school community, it is nevertheless important to recognise that this policy cannot replace the most vital qualities needed in dealing with such personal issues as suicide, bereavement and loss – the sensitivity, care and compassion we offer to one another and to our students on a daily basis.

Signed:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chairperson (BOM)

Dr Caroline Renahan

Date: 26<sup>th</sup> September 2023

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal

Mrs Eileen Cuddihy-Higgins

Date: 26<sup>th</sup> September 2023

