

### **Preparing for the Anniversary of the Boston Marathon: Considerations for School Administrators**

The Boston Marathon bombing was a tragedy for our city and affected us all. School was not in session for most Boston schools during the week of the Marathon bombings and the shelter in place warning, but students and school staff returned to school the following week still thinking and talking about what had happened. Many School Administrators were faced with questions and concerns from faculty and parents. Students of all ages needed reassurance that they were safe. Several Boston schools made time during the school day to help students process and find ways to cope with the tragedy at the Boston Marathon. Just as this type of support following a tragic event is necessary, it is equally important to make a plan for supporting students around the anniversary of a tragic event, as anniversaries can trigger emotional reactions similar to when the event first occurred.

With the 2014 Boston Marathon approaching and with discussion of last year's tragedy resurfacing in the media and in students' homes and communities, students will experience a range of feelings as they are reminded of the tragedy. Students will again look to significant adults in their lives for clarity and guidance on how to manage their feelings and thoughts. School can be a safe place for students to talk about what they are seeing and hearing in regard to the anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombings. By providing opportunities for students to express thoughts and feelings, school staff can help support and model healthy ways of coping.

As leaders in the school, School Administrators are important models for the school community on how to talk about and address challenging issues, such as coping with tragedies. Teachers often look to the school administration for guidance on how to address these types of situations. Below are some things for School Administrators to consider in planning for how to address the anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombings with students at school:

- **Be mindful of how adults at school could be impacted by the anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombings.** Adults may personally struggle with the upcoming anniversary. School Administrators should consider acknowledging the different feelings teachers and staff may have and to remind adults that emotional reaction in response to the anniversary of a tragedy is normal and that there is support available for adults if they need it.
- **Allow time during the school day for age appropriate classroom discussion and activities related to the Boston Marathon.** Provide structured opportunities at school for students to talk with adults about the Boston Marathon. If students want to talk about the Boston Marathon bombings and are not allowed to, adults may unintentionally send the message to students that it's not ok to talk about scary things that happen and students may not get the support they need. Additionally, students are more likely to get accurate information about a tragic event if they talk with adults rather than rely on social media and peers for information about the event.
- **Avoid using all school announcements or assemblies as a time to discuss the tragedy.** While there are occasions at school when it is beneficial to bring the whole student body together, the most appropriate setting for a discussion with students about a tragedy is in a familiar and

natural forming group, such as students' homerooms or classrooms. Smaller groups can provide students with a sense of safety and can invite more discussion.

- **Assist teachers in planning what to say to students about the Boston Marathon.** Though teachers have a good understanding of how much information and what type of information their group of students can handle, teachers will be dealing with their own feelings around the Boston Marathon bombings and some may feel anxious about talking about the tragedy with their class. Guide teachers in thinking about what to say and what not to say to students about the Boston Marathon. School Administrators might consider brainstorming with teachers questions about the Boston Marathon that students might ask and then assisting in planning appropriate classroom activities, such as making posters to show Boston pride. Holding a staff meeting to give teachers and faculty a time to come together to plan for discussions about the Boston Marathon with students could be helpful. Encourage teachers to emphasize safety, keep conversations age appropriate, begin conversations by asking what the students know about the Boston Marathon, and allow students' comments and questions to guide classroom discussion (See "When Students Want to Talk About the Boston Marathon: Tips for Teachers" for additional information).
- **Know what community resources are available.** Consult with mental health professionals at your school about additional resources that can help guide you and faculty in talking with students about tragedy. These professionals can also provide information on resources in the community if a student, parent, or staff member needs additional support.
- **Have a plan for what to do if a student becomes upset during discussion about the tragedy.** The plan should include a quiet place to move the student to, counselors or other support staff who will be available to meet with students who need additional support, and steps for following up with the student and the student's parent or caregiver.
- **Be mindful of parent and caregiver needs.** The needs of parents and caregivers can include information about the school's plan for addressing the Boston Marathon tragedy with students, ideas for how to help children cope with a tragedy, and information about resources within the school and community. School Administrators should develop a plan for meeting the needs of parents and caregivers. A letter home to families could address many of the needs listed above.
- **Be available to staff.** While classroom discussion and activities about the Boston Marathon are taking place, School Administrators may want to float through the school building and be available to answer questions, offer breaks, give support in the classroom, or help with an upset student. In challenging times, the presence of leadership can be a comfort to both staff and students.
- **Encourage staff and teachers to reach out about what they need.** Giving support to students during a challenging time can be stressful. Encourage asking for help and self-care. A brief staff meeting at the end of the day can be helpful in allowing teachers to debrief, share personal thoughts and feelings, and get support from colleagues.
- **Take care of yourself.** Find healthy ways to nurture your emotional and physical health.

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