From the reporter’s desk: Best practices for covering youth suicide

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Evolution of the Weekly's coverage

Stunned into silence
Teen's suicide leaves Paly community coping with unthinkable loss for second time in 13 months
by Rachel Metz

Benjamin Tachibana's freshman school photo in the Paly yearbook eerily appears opposite the page published in memory of classmate Steven Wertheimer, who took his life last October by throwing himself in front of a train.

Tachibana, 15, who appears bright-eyed and youthful in his yearbook photo, headed for the train tracks Friday night as his peers and their parents jubilantly cheered on the football team at the first-ever night game on Palo Alto High School's Hod Ray Field.

Just a few hundred yards from the Churchill Avenue crossing where Wertheimer killed himself that Monday morning, an engineer driving southbound Train No. 86 at 7:45 p.m. saw Tachibana's silhouette in the darkness and attempted to slow down, blowing the horn and flashing lights in warning.

Tachibana didn't heed the signals.
Gunn High student dies by suicide
Principal to parents: 'Listen, talk and answer questions honestly'

by Elena Kadvany / Palo Alto Weekly

Editor's note: Resources for any person who is feeling depressed, troubled or suicidal are listed at the bottom of this article.

Gunn High School Principal Kathie Laurence, in an email to school families Tuesday afternoon, is urging parents to talk openly with their children and to reach out for help if needed following the death by suicide of a senior in his home on Tuesday.

Staff informed students who were still on campus for the last period of the day in person, Laurence said, and the school's crisis intervention team was available to students throughout the afternoon. The team, made up of mental health professionals, will "continue to be available for our students, teachers, and parents in the coming days," Laurence wrote.

Grief counselors, mental health therapists and psychologists will also be available to support children and teachers at the schools that the student's siblings attend, Superintendent Max McGee wrote in a message to Palo Alto Unified parents and staff Tuesday afternoon.

"It's "imperative," he wrote, "for all of us to be vigilant and keep a close eye on our children and that our older students look after one another."

Laurence, who is in her first semester as the school's principal, also encouraged parents to talk "honestly" with their children and to reach out to the school, including its wellness center, with any questions or concerns.

"As a parent, I encourage you to listen, talk and answer questions honestly as your child processes this event and its impact," Laurence wrote. "If you notice any concerning changes in your student's behavior or emotional state, please contact a counselor or trusted faculty member.
Internal changes, efforts

- Created written suicide policy to guide our company’s coverage of deaths by suicide. The policy evolved and became more tightly restrictive as the 2009-10 cluster developed.
- Observation of World Health Organization and AFSP guidelines for reporting on suicide
- Developed resource pages, which were later updated and expanded in collaboration with local mental health professionals and parent-advocates
- Started practice of including an editor’s note at the top of stories, pointing readers to resources
- Careful comment moderation online
- Educating new staff members about responsible coverage
Beyond-the-crisis reporting