

The NASSP Principal Recovery Network Guide to Recovery

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About	4
Introduction	5
1. Securing Support and Responding to Offers of Assistance.....	6
2. Reopening the School	8
3. Attending to the Ongoing Needs of Students and Staff.....	10
4. Holding Commemorations and Annual Remembrances.....	12
5. Listening to Student Voice	14

“One principal I talked to said the guide is the most useful tool she received. She has it in a folder on her desk, and she pretty much picks it up daily to look at and think, ‘What did they all do in this situation, what did they do in that situation?’ It also has all of our contact information in it. I know the attitude of this group is: Call me night or day. We’ve got time to talk to you. We get it.”

—Elizabeth Brown, former Principal
Forest High School
Ocala, FL

The NASSP Principal Recovery Network Guide to Recovery

About the NASSP Principal Recovery Network

Founded in April 2019, the NASSP Principal Recovery Network (PRN) is a national network of current and former school leaders who have experienced gun violence tragedies in their buildings. Together, the PRN seeks to assist principals in the immediate aftermath of a crisis and beyond. PRN members reach out directly to their colleagues to provide much needed support, share the combined wisdom of their experience with the larger principal community through various outlets, assist schools during recovery, and advocate for national school safety enhancements and violence prevention programs.

For more on the PRN, visit nassp.org/prn.

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Introduction

Of all the forms of disaster, crisis, and violence that can shock a school community, gun violence can be particularly traumatic. Though statistically rare, the frequency of school shootings has increased in recent years. The scale of the incident may vary, but every school shooting takes a distinct toll on students, educators, parents, and the community. In the aftermath, many will turn to you, the principal, as a source of support and guidance, even as you seek to personally recover and process your own emotion.

While there may not be an exact return to “normal” after a shooting tragedy, you can recover and create a healthy new normal for your school. Everyone responds to the new normal in different ways—as principal, you must seek to allow your students, staff, and yourself to heal in the way that works best for you and for them to the greatest extent possible. For example, some teachers and staff are going to want to get right back into their work and routine to avoid dwelling on the tragedy. Others are going to require much more ongoing support. And still others may not require support immediately, but eventually, they may need it.

As you begin this recovery process, please remember two things:

You are not alone, and there is no established timeline for recovery.

This document is a collection of personal best practices and practical advice from principals and assistant principals who led schools in recovery after a shooting. It is organized into five areas that in our experience will likely require your immediate attention in the wake of such violence.

It is important to note that this guide is not intended to be a comprehensive checklist that you, as a school leader, should follow step-by-step in the aftermath of a shooting or other violent event. Every incident is different. Instead, as school leaders who have lived through this experience, we offer guidance and advice based on a few of the issues we commonly faced in recovering from our own traumatic events. We hope this document is a helpful starting place, and we would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and offer ongoing support.

If you are a school leader who has experienced a shooting in your building, the PRN is here to support you. Send a message to advocacy@nassp.org, and NASSP staff will connect you with a PRN member.

“Tragedy is tragedy, and we’re all dealing with this. That’s where our help comes, in the aftermath of it. Because you’re not going to wake up some morning and everything’s going to be back to normal. That’s why we reach out.”

—Frank DeAngelis, former Principal
Columbine High School
Littleton, CO

1. Securing Support and Responding to Offers of Assistance

- A full faculty meeting, off-site if possible, should be held as soon as possible to help provide guidance to staff. This meeting will allow staff to gain a better understanding of what took place and begin to express their needs and concerns.
- Trauma-informed counselors and mental health professionals, who are trained and coordinated to provide assistance, should be on hand immediately.
- School leaders should take adequate time to vet and consider outside groups who offer to lead counseling after the event. Many organizations mean well, but you will need to make determinations on which groups will be the best fit for your school and community.
 - » Principals should coordinate with their district offices to determine who should be the primary point of contact for outside support services.
 - » It is also important to recognize that your school-based counselors and mental health professionals may be struggling, as well. If they provide support to students and staff in the initial aftermath of the incident, they may need their own care from outside trauma-informed mental health services.
 - » School staff should be given options and explanations of what any outside counseling group's program will consist of prior to recommending the service to them.
 - » Counselors and mental health professionals should be present in the daily routines of the school once learning resumes.
 - » Varied forms of counseling, groups, and programs should be included in the first couple of months to ensure students and staff can find the support that works best for them.
- After conducting an internal assessment to determine what your school may need from the community and outside groups, craft and release an official statement or social media post. You may receive many offers of support, and if the principal doesn't provide public guidance, you may receive offers of support you don't necessarily need.
 - » Consider creating a productive outlet for members of your community to provide support and/or express grief.
 - » Create a list and collect information about offers of donations or support, and let individuals know that you will contact them when you are ready or in need. You may not be able to take advantage of all offers of support in the immediate aftermath, but it may be useful as your school's recovery progresses.
 - » Ensure that no decisions are made directly on behalf of victims and their families without direct consultation.
- If you are receiving letters, gifts, flowers, teddy bears, toys, and other items to the school that you don't need, consider reaching out to local colleges, historical societies, and other groups who may be willing to help receive, store, and catalog everything.
 - » Principals should ensure that a trusted teacher or other staff member can be tasked with tracking gifts and sending thank you letters.
 - » Enlisting volunteers who can help collect, process, sort, and catalog items can be helpful, but ensure that they are properly overseen by a staff member.
- Therapy dogs have universally been viewed as a welcome and helpful resource for students in the immediate aftermath of a violent event.
- Work with your district office to identify a public relations professional who will serve as a school spokesperson and assist with communicating to the media. Once that person is identified, it's important to work with them to provide staff with media talking points and training.
- Consider appointing a qualified coordinator to assist with ongoing staff communication and provide you with a synopsis of opinions, concerns, needs, etc. Your staff will need to be heard in the days, weeks, and months of initial recovery, and you will need to provide adequate infrastructure to ensure that happens.

- Provide regular updates to staff in writing and in meetings to ensure everyone is kept in the loop.
 - » If your school receives new state or federal grant funding to aid in recovery, work with your district office to ensure that you have adequate staff organizing the allocation of that funding. Ensure that key stakeholders have input into how new funding is allocated for staff, support, and programming.
- In the aftermath of a shooting or other traumatic incident, it is also very important that school leaders seek out the support they need in addition to trying to care for everyone else in the school community. If you are struggling, there are other school leaders in the Principal Recovery Network who know what you are going through and would love to talk to you.

Securing Support and Responding to Offers of Assistance

Testimonial

There is no greater outpouring of support from your community than after a tragedy. Your community, surrounding communities, schools, business, and others will all want to lend a helping hand. During this time, it is important to remember that you cannot do this alone. You will need supports to benefit the reason we all come to school each day—our students.

Even before a tragedy strikes, it is helpful for schools to be working with local mental health organizations around them. Build relationships now with community therapists and mental health counselors so they are willing and ready to offer support. This also ensures the therapists and mental health counselors are the type of people we want to engage with our students and staff. Not every offer to help after a tragedy comes with the best intentions. You should appoint someone you trust to vet and connect therapists and counselors with your staff and students.

Schools and businesses will want to offer food, services, supplies, and more to help with the healing process. You should dedicate a point person to collect and organize these resources. Remind the businesses that we might not need that “right now,” but we may call on them when we do. As our administration team thought about supporting the students or staff after the tragedy, we often looked back to the list and found local places that had previously offered to coordinate services and donate goods. This saved time and resources on our end, allowed others to give back, and brought the staff and students together. The resources ranged from food for staff and students to supplies to distribute during our remembrance days. When there is a need, every little bit helps.

The focus for securing support and responding to offers of assistance should be on what the students and staff need. Listen to those voices—they will tell you what is needed. Once you know, use the resources all around you. People want to help, so be willing to accept the help. Even if it feels like it sometimes, you are not alone.

Michael Sedlak, former Assistant Principal, **Chardon High School**, Chardon, OH

2. Reopening the School

- The principal should be the lead decision maker and rely on a small team to support them—the district superintendent must allow the principal to make the decisions for the school and offer support when needed.
- Visibility of the principal is very important throughout the recovery process—students and staff want to see you and lean on you for support. Transparency and vulnerability are also important qualities for the principal to possess at this time, as they give others an example of how they too can be honest with their feelings and personal struggles.
- Ensure that all physical damage to school is repaired before bringing anyone back.
 - » Consider if there need to be changes made, not just returning things to the way they were before. For example, affected classrooms may need to be repurposed for other uses if it would be triggering for students and staff to attempt to work and learn in those spaces.
 - » Ensure that community stakeholders, parents, and staff are adequately consulted as decisions about changes to the building are made.
- Once the school is “cleared” (repaired, cleaned, no longer a crime scene, etc.), consider organizing a meeting or gathering just for staff before it reopens to the public and students. Staff need to begin to feel comfortable in their building first before they are prepared to support students and resume teaching. It will also provide a good opportunity to share updates, coordinate next steps for reopening, and listen to your staff.
 - » You may also want to consider allowing for several teacher in-service days in addition to this initial meeting event to allow additional time for staff collaboration and conversations.
- Assess the appropriate amount of time that will be needed to bring staff and students back and reopen the building intentionally. Every situation is different, and it may not be right for every school to reopen just because the building is physically ready.
 - » Consider not reopening school or resuming any instruction until any funerals or observances have taken place. This provides time for grieving and recovery and will allow students and families to attend these services.
 - » If the school must be reopened prior to the completion of these services, make arrangements for all staff and students to attend services if they desire. Once the school is reopened, consider hosting an “open house” or “reunification day” to allow families, staff, and/or students to visit the school on their terms and feel safe before returning for official school days. Mental health professionals and therapy dogs (if available) should be on hand for these types of events.
- When students are brought back, consider if limited-hour school days may be necessary for a period to aid in initial recovery and adjustment. Refraining from rigorous instruction on the day of return is highly recommended. Allow time for students and staff to reconnect. Be mindful of the time frame of the incident as students and staff may struggle at this specific time each day for a while.
- Be aware that the optics of students or staff that are no longer present on campus due to fatalities or injuries may elicit different reactions from different people. Support and compassion are paramount.
- Ensure that teachers and school staff are trained and equipped with instructions on what to say about the incident in their classrooms and where to direct students who need support and assistance.

Reopening the School

Testimonial

In the immediate aftermath of our tragedy, district focus was on reopening the school. It is imperative that school leaders play an active role in what that reopening plan looks like. And that plan must be slow and methodical, by design.

Meeting with the staff as soon as possible is critical when determining proper readiness. One of the first things that I discussed with the district, was that I did NOT want students back to school until all victims' funerals had been held. Next, we had to determine how were we going to ensure that the staff and students knew that the administration would support them, not just with words. We needed to prove it.

We eventually decided to "Reclaim the Nest" two weeks after our event. Before we came back, we met with the staff to discuss and alter the plan. We ultimately had a reunification for staff, students, and their families on campus the weekend before school opened. This gave an opportunity for staff and students to reunite for the first time since the tragedy. It was an emotional and much needed time during the healing process for students to return to campus with the support of their families.

In an earlier speech I gave to the community, I made the commitment to hug each student as often as they needed. The day of the reunification, I stood in the cafeteria where students could pick up school supplies and other items donated by the community and made myself available to hug students and parents who took me up on that offer. This day was an essential transition back to school for our high school family. When we finally returned to school, the kids and staff were excited to "Reclaim the Nest." We started gradually, with half days for the first two days back, then we added two additional hours for two more days, until eventually we were back to our regular bell schedule—all the while slowly introducing curriculum.

Our easing back in process was critical as many had anxiety returning. Our process included many "non-academic" days, mental health resources, therapy dogs, and lots of hugs so we could start the long road to recovery in a positive way.

Ty Thompson, former Principal, **Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School**, Parkland, FL

3. Attending to the Ongoing Needs of Students and Staff

- School leaders and staff must be extremely sensitive and ensure support resources are on hand when school shootings happen elsewhere. Watching those events unfold and the surrounding news coverage can be extremely traumatizing for those who've lived through similar events.
- Consider what students may need to succeed after living through trauma, especially those who have struggled academically in the aftermath. For example, colleges may appreciate letters from school leaders explaining that traumatic events could have precipitated drops in grades or test scores and should be considered when making application decisions.
- Future safety training, drills, and preparation is important, but schools that have experienced violence must be especially careful that it is conducted sensitively and does not retraumatize students and staff in any way.
- Conduct regular surveys of students and staff to identify ongoing needs and solicit suggestions for continued recovery efforts.
 - » While it is great to praise students for being strong and resilient, when assessing students who may need more ongoing support, care must be taken to not accidentally communicate that any student who is struggling is “weak” or “not resilient.” Express recognition that everyone is struggling, and that obtaining support is a sign of strength, not weakness.
- If possible, consider creating a “wellness center,” within the school that can be a warm, inviting place for both students and staff. This area should provide privacy and be separate from other support areas, like the guidance or counseling offices.
- For high schools, consider establishing programs specifically to help graduating seniors so they have a continued support system in place once they leave the school.
- There is no timeline on the need for ongoing professional mental health support after a school shooting. Efforts must be made to secure resources for not just months, but years following a traumatic event.
 - » It is also important to ensure that the school has access to mental health professionals who specialize in grief in addition to trauma. Grief counseling will become a greater need as time passes.

“The minute I got to Sandy Hook, my first thought was the kids, and getting the school back on track. But once I got there I realized, ‘Wow. This is going to be as much about adults as it is about children for a very long time.’ It turned out that admitting they couldn’t come back after the tragedy was probably the most courageous thing some teachers did.”

—Kathleen Gombos, Principal
Sandy Hook Elementary School
Newtown, CT

Attending to the Ongoing Needs of Students and Staff

Testimonial

When a shooting occurs on campus, the needs of the staff, students, and community extend for years and change over time. The immediate needs even differ by the specific experience each individual encountered.

The most important thing I did as a principal was ensure that I was present and that I listened. I created opportunities for people to come together, as everyone found strength in each other. There are the immediate and obvious needs such as counseling and support services, but as time passes, these needs change. One thing always remained constant: *the need for people to be able to express their feelings and to have opportunities to support one another.*

I created several opportunities for staff to come together in the morning before school, just to talk and support each other. This was especially helpful after the school shootings that happened in the months and years after ours. Each time a school would experience this horrific tragedy, it was like ripping the scab from a wound that will never fully heal. In the aftermath, I would send a message to staff and open the conference room in the morning with some breakfast treats to allow everyone to come together and talk. We also engaged in frequent “check-ins” with staff members who needed that extra layer of support throughout the school day.

Student voice is also very important to me so I created a lunch program called “Kefford’s Kitchen” where students could sign up to dine with me during their lunch period. This provided an open forum for kids to share their thoughts and feelings and helped me to gauge the needs across campus. As the students who were physically on campus during the tragedy matriculated out of the school, I still had to ensure any siblings or relatives were identified and had a special layer of care surrounding them.

Depending on each tragedy’s circumstances, certain things will act as triggers for people. In our case, the fire alarm sounded during the shooting, and that sound was associated with the tragedy. We modified our drills and protocols when it came to any alarms, to ensure people felt safe when and if alarms sounded. We also brought in groups such as the Mind-Body Ambassadors to help teach coping strategies to assist people when they might experience a triggering situation.

Attending to ongoing needs comes down to being aware of what those needs are. Constant communication and opportunities to engage are critical to providing support.

Michelle Kefford, Principal, **Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School**, Parkland, FL

4. Holding Commemorations and Annual Remembrances

- When considering commemorations, vigils, remembrances, and memorials, students and staff must be included in the decision-making process.
 - » Conduct surveys before making planning decisions to ensure you've gathered feedback from your school community.
 - » In addition to student surveys, consider hosting planning discussions with student leadership groups to gather additional feedback.
- For the one-year mark, multiple PRN members have found that their communities have an aversion to the term "anniversary," as it could connote a celebration. Alternative phrasing could include "one-year mark," "two-year mark," "annual remembrance," etc.
- Consider planning commemorations in a way that makes the activities optional. Not all students will want to take part, and for some, the commemoration could trigger anxiety. You may consider having extra adult support (volunteers, mental health professionals, retired teachers) on hand for these events.
- Commemorations are usually best served as internal and private events.
- When planning activities for remembrances, focus on things not directly related to the shooting that may retraumatize the community, like a day of service, writing thank you letters to the community, and moments of silence.
 - » Consider planning actions that both allow the school community to show students that they are loved and supported as well as allowing the students to give back to the community and show their appreciation for that support.
- Scale it in a way that is sustainable for the following years.
- Planning for annual remembrances should take place months, not days, in advance.
 - » You may also want to consider phasing out the annual actions after all the students who were involved in the incident have graduated.
 - » Care must also be taken by the administration team to ensure that extra security is in place around the annual mark. When considering permanent or semi-permanent physical memorials, ensure that victims' families are provided the opportunity to give input on artwork, plaques, sacred spaces, or any other structure or space being constructed.
 - » Principals should consult their district office on memorial planning, and there are many important considerations. Memorials in the schools of some PRN members have become attractions for many people outside of the school, creating challenges with continuing learning in the building. Communities like Columbine chose to construct memorials off school grounds for those reasons.
- For graduations, survey and meet with students again to determine how they want to honor their fallen classmates.
 - » PRN members received feedback that students did not want empty chairs in the rows. Some placed a separate section of chairs on the stage and included names and special commemorations in the program booklets. Students were allowed to present flowers and items on the open chairs.

“It’s even hard to explain to my wife why the group is so helpful. It’s almost cathartic to me to sit with all these people and to be able to share my story and see heads nodding. Not like, ‘Oh, that’s interesting,’ but to see people say, ‘Yeah, I know what you’re talking about, I’ve been there.’”

—Greg Johnson, Principal
West Liberty-Salem High School
Salem, OH

Holding Commemorations and Annual Remembrances

Testimonial

Within weeks of our school's tragedy, we had to be prepared to deal with a wide variety of opinions and perspectives on remembrances and how the school needed to respond or change in the wake of what happened. Based on our experience, it's clear that a broad range of voices on campus should be heard long before a plan is put into place. Some decisions are not going to be left to the site leadership alone. When in doubt, listen to and empower student voices and staff members in an organized way.

You're not in it alone. Delegating authority is what we all want to do better in our role as principals. Embrace your skills at leading as a coalition builder. After a school tragedy, it is natural that people are going to want to share big ideas with you for the school's remembrances. It's important to regularly connect with others in your sphere of influence and your district's chain of command to establish the perspectives you want to be heard when your input is asked for or your leadership is called on.

Keep the students front and center by setting up a clear structure for listening to their wants and needs as decisions are made. Then be prepared to incorporate student voices that may feel left out. Just like the adults in our communities, the kids with the strongest voices are likely to be the first to surface and advocate. And, like a good teacher who structures a solid classroom discussion on a passionate topic, a principal also needs to formalize the discussion and encourage various individuals to listen to one another so that even the quiet voices have an opportunity to be heard. I found that holding a series of open-forum town hall style meetings with all students interested in planning the one-year remembrance helped my school include a broader number of voices, as well as narrow direct participation down to a manageable size. Start these meetings earlier than you think is necessary!

Finally, as you meet with students on planning the annual memorial, also clearly and visibly check in with your various teachers and staff groups. This is one area where I feel I could have done better. These staff check-in sessions can be as simple as using part of a faculty meeting time to brief staff on what the kids are asking or saying. It helps staff to be involved and listened to so they can give their input. Know that the closer you get to the date of your tragedy's annual remembrance, the louder the dissenting voices are going to get. It always helps to be early, stay calm, and know your limits.

Warman Hall, former Principal, **Aztec High School**, Aztec, NM

5. Listening to Student Voice

- Student voice must be heard and incorporated into the entirety of the school's recovery process. Principals should consider utilizing existing student leadership groups like Student Council to encourage and organize positive voice among students. You might also consider forming a new student group or committee to advise ongoing recovery needs.
- Make it clear to your student body that administrators, teachers, and staff are listening.
- Students should be given adequate time to talk about what happened, not just with mental health professionals, but also with other students, trusted adults, and close friends.
- It is important to ask for student opinions and find out what causes students stress, anxiety, and other emotional responses.
- In a situation involving elementary students, space still needs to be created for regular discussion. Encourage students to work with adults or to write about their experiences. If the event comes up in class discussion, acknowledge the student and ensure they are offered the opportunity to talk about it with an adult support person. Parents should be consulted on developmentally appropriate conversations with students.

Listening to Student Voice

Testimonial

In the days and months following the shooting, there were numerous viewpoints and suggestions on a variety of topics: when to open the school to begin the new year, what extra school safety measures to implement, and what should be done with the area where the shooting occurred. The noise created by all these was deafening.

As a principal, I have always committed to a student-centered approach to leadership. I heard all these opinions, yet I was eventually able to quiet the well-meaning voices in my mind. I made space for myself to reflect, and I returned to what I knew was a best practice...listening to the students. I met with the elected student leaders of the school in a casual open forum. They talked, and I just listened. I listened to their experiences on the day of the shooting. I listened to their concerns about school safety. I listened to their anger at the shooter for bringing an event into their lives that they never wanted and never asked for. I asked them only one question, "What do you want Forest High School to be like when we start school on the first day this year?"

Their answers were direct and blunt and passionate. They spoke of the school culture and school spirit and the fact that they were worried that students would not laugh again or have a good time at school again. And then the most outspoken student of the group said these words and I have never forgotten them: "The shooting is NOT our history. It was just a day in our history." That statement resonated with me through the entire process of reopening the school, turning the location of the shooting into a place where all students felt accepted and safe. That student's insight even directed what we planned to do as a school community to commemorate the date of the shooting a year later.

I continued meeting with these students as well as other student groups every single year numerous times. I made them an integral part of our work to create a new school culture after the shooting. I often think back to that first meeting, and now I realize that what I truly heard in the students' voices was the depth of resiliency that has allowed the school community to move forward and stand strong as the Wildcat family.

Elizabeth Brown, former Principal, **Forest High School**, Ocala, FL

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