

Principal Recovery Network (PRN)

GUIDE TO RECOVERY

SECOND EDITION



NATIONAL
PRINCIPALS
ASSOCIATION™

THE VOICE OF SCHOOL LEADERS

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Principal Recovery Network (PRN) Guide to Recovery Second Edition

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“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

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About the Principal Recovery Network

Founded in April 2019, the National Principals Association 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 principals.org/prn.

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 emotions.

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 the 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 will want to get right back to work and their routine to avoid dwelling on the tragedy. Others will require much more ongoing support. And still others will 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, assistant principals, and superintendents 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. While the Guide is primarily focused on gun violence, many of the best practices could be applicable for recovery from other tragedies or disasters that may befall a school.

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. Rather, it is a collection of lived experiences and lessons learned, offering guidance based on the approaches and practices that have helped us navigate and move forward through our own tragedies.

Every incident is different. As school leaders who have lived through this experience, we offer guidance and advice based on a few of the issues we commonly faced 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@principals.org, and National Principals Association staff will connect you with a PRN member.

Securing Support and Responding to Offers of Assistance

- A full faculty meeting, offsite if possible, should be held as soon as possible to help provide guidance for staff. This meeting will allow staff to gain a better understanding of what took place and begin to express their needs and concerns.
 - » Consider scheduling an administrators-only debrief to discuss each leader's immediate responsibility and need for support.
- Trauma-informed counselors and mental health professionals who are trained and coordinated to provide assistance must be on hand immediately.
 - » Before any schoolwide tragedy takes place, principals may want to meet with district leaders and the district mental health team to establish a single point of contact to receive outside offers of counseling support and establish formal MOUs with trusted national school behavioral health organizations such as the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (NCSCB). These MOUs can fit within formal district and school safety plans coordinated with the local FEMA office.
- School leaders must 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 determine which groups will be the best fit for your school and community.
 - » Coordinate with your district offices to determine who will be the primary point of contact for outside support services.
 - » 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.
- Give school staff options and explanations of what any outside counseling program will consist of prior to recommending the service to them.
 - » Ensure counselors and mental health professionals are present in the daily routines of the school once learning resumes.
 - » Include varied forms of counseling, groups, and programs 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 and/or district leadership 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.
 - » Consider crafting an automatic email reply expressing gratitude and specifically listing links or contacts for where and how to donate depending on what people may be inquiring about.
- 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, public libraries, and other groups who may be willing to help receive, store, and catalog everything.

- » Ensure that a trusted teacher or other staff member can be tasked with tracking gifts and sending thank-you letters.
- » Enlist volunteers who can help collect, process, sort, and catalog items, but ensure that they are properly overseen by a staff member.
- » Some PRN members noted that having some of the items displayed in the school was retraumatizing. Careful consideration should be given to what items will be displayed and for how long.
- » Clearly communicate with your school community in advance if some items will not be displayed in the school or before the removal or disposal of items. Without adequate notice, the unexpected removal of memorials, personal belongings, or other meaningful items may evoke strong emotional responses and cause additional distress for those affected.
- » Proactively, consider meeting with district leaders to review policy to address established protocols for handling items left on campus after a tragedy as tokens of support from the public.

- 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 in communicating with the media. Once that person is identified, work with them to provide staff with media talking points and training. Increasingly, district leaders are compelled to coordinate official emails and social media posts after any high-profile event involving district schools. Proactively work with district leaders to identify how school leaders can use approved platforms and automated communication systems to aid the school in vetting and responding to offers of help and contact from media sources.
 - » Consider consulting with your district leaders to remove faculty emails from the school website in the aftermath if staff is flooded with unwanted or inappropriate correspondence.
- Consider appointing a qualified school-site 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.



"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

- Provide regular updates (daily, if possible) 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, seek out the support that you as a principal 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 PRN who know what you are going through and would love to talk to you.

Securing Funding for Recovery Efforts

As principals begin to proactively make plans to address a crisis, needs are often identified that will necessitate grant support. Work with your district leaders to ensure that every effort is being made to apply for and take advantage of the various state and federal grant opportunities that are available to schools that have suffered a shooting tragedy. Caution is warranted in accepting grant-writing assistance from any entity or consultant that requires a percentage of the grant before checking technical grant writing assistance from federal or state sources. Even some well-intentioned and supportive nonprofit organizations will require a fee, or a percentage of the grant proceeds, to take on the writing and reporting that is always involved in securing a grant. Predatory or opportunistic offers for grant assistance will increase after a school tragedy.

In general, school and district leaders can work with their safety teams to become familiar with a number of state and federal sources that are already working to vet reliable and manageable grants. The single most important resource to connect with is the **SchoolSafety.gov Grants Finder Tool**. This resource is an aggregate

database of mental health, school safety, and emergency management funding available through the federal government. Additionally, every state receives federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funds that are administered through your state office of crime victim advocacy. Principals and district leaders should seek out contact with your state department of education and state crime victims office to identify subgrants and recurring funding for post-traumatic school support. The following are a few standout grant programs that can be further researched through the SchoolSafety.gov Grants Finder Tool:

- **Project SERV** is a source of short-term and targeted long-term funding through the U.S. Department of Education that has a wide range of allowable uses to help restore the learning environment after a school violence incident or natural disaster. The application process is kept intentionally short to make the program responsive to immediate school needs after an incident.
- **The Anti-Terrorism and Emergency Assistance Program (AEAP)** is an invitation-only federal funding support that is administered through the U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime (OVC). This funding source is a good reason for school and district leaders to cultivate a solid working relationship with your state crime victims' office, school safety office, and attorney general's office. The funding is also available to local/tribal governments.
- **The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) Mental Health Block Grant (MHBG)** is an annual non-competitive formula allocation to states. This funding can support long-term community-based mental health and counseling support through out-patient and established mental health centers as the school and district seek ongoing trauma recovery years after an incident.



There is no greater outpouring of support from your community than after a tragedy. Your community, surrounding communities, schools, businesses, 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 help to support 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 that therapists and mental health counselors are qualified and prepared to engage with our students and staff. Not every offer to help after a tragedy comes with the best intentions. 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. 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



Reopening the School

- As the principal, be the lead decision-maker and rely on a small team to support you. The district superintendent must allow you to make decisions for the school and offer support when needed.
- Your visibility is 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 you set an example for others of how they too can be honest with their feelings and personal struggles.
 - » Consider hiring additional staff to offset typical administrative duties, so current administrators can be present for and visible to staff and students.
 - » Hiring a retired principal or other administrator to assist in managing school operations has been cited as a very valuable resource by PRN members. In cases where this was possible, it allowed the principal to be visible to and attentive for students and staff.
- Ensure that all physical damage to school is repaired before bringing anyone back.
 - » Consider if changes need to be made. Don't just focus on returning things to the way they were before. For example, affected classrooms may need to be repurposed for other uses if it would be retraumatizing 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 the school 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.
 - » Also 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, arrange 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 who are no longer present on campus due to fatalities or injuries may elicit different reactions from different people. Support and compassion are paramount.
 - » Consider rearranging classroom furniture and seating arrangements to reduce potential trauma reminders. For some students and staff, the presence of an empty seat belonging to a classmate who was lost in the tragedy may serve as a painful reminder or contribute to retraumatization. Thoughtful adjustments to the classroom environment can help support the healing process while remaining respectful of those who have been lost.
- 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.
- After very high-profile incidents that receive significant national media attention, school and district officials may want to consider renaming the school and potentially demolishing the building and moving to a new location. Some PRN members whose schools have kept the same name or location have experienced a significant amount of swatting or threats called into the school even many years after the incident. Changing the name and/or school location can mitigate this burdensome impediment to continued recovery.

Testimonial: Reopening the School



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 "nonacademic" 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



Attending to the Ongoing Needs of Students and Staff

Students

- **Sensitivity to Future Events:** 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 offering an optional support session for students and staff (separately) after school or before the next school day.
- **Academic Support and Advocacy:** 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.
- **Trauma-Informed Training:** 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. Timing of drills must also be considered, and they should not coincide with a significant date related to the tragedy or a time that mirrors the original event as this can lead to retraumatization.
- **Ongoing Needs Assessment:** Conduct regular surveys of students and staff to identify ongoing needs and solicit suggestions for continued recovery efforts.
 - » Consider creating a recovery committee to discuss and plan ongoing supports, events, and efforts based on survey feedback.
 - » 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.
- **Establishment of Wellness Centers:** 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.

- **Classroom Integration:** Embed Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) learning and delivery, mindfulness, and breathing techniques into the daily curriculum to help with self-regulation.
- **Targeted Support:** Implement a structured referral system for students needing trauma-focused interventions (e.g., Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy or Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools).
- **Post-Graduation Support:** 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.
 - » If the incident took place in an elementary or middle school, teachers and staff at the middle and/or high schools that the students eventually move to must be trained to provide the proper social and emotional support that's needed.
- **Specific Support Activities**
 - » Implement "lunch bunch" meetings as a forum for support and skill-building groups.
 - » Utilize classroom-based psycho-educational and skill-building strategies to reach students in their daily learning environment.
 - » Conduct regular classroom observations and trauma screenings to assess general dynamics and identify individuals needing specific interventions.
 - » Provide clear pathways for referrals to Recovery Team support and community-based treatment services for students requiring intensive care.
- It is important to reiterate that 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.

Staff

- **Adults Matter:** While student achievement is the primary mission, acknowledge that staff wellbeing is fundamental to the school's ability to function. Their experiences, feelings, and voices matter and must be prioritized.
 - » Consider establishing a multidisciplinary recovery team to review guidance, coordinate responses, and engage in resource mapping to identify available community supports.
- **Transparency Builds Trust:** Trust is fostered when leaders are transparent about the "why" behind decisions. Take the time to provide extra explanation when choosing one path over another; this goes a long way in ensuring staff feel heard and respected.
- **Grace Over Policy:** Recognize that in the aftermath of trauma, strict adherence to policy may need to give way to grace. Understand when to offer support, encourage a mental health break, or provide flexibility, prioritizing human needs over rigid handbook rules.
- **Establish Structures for Voice**
 - » Create a regular outlet (e.g., a dedicated document, feedback loop, or committee) where staff can ask questions and voice concerns respectfully.
 - » Understand that reaching a consensus is often impossible. Communicate decisions clearly and transparently so that even those who disagree understand that their voice was heard, avoiding a culture where only the "loudest voice" dictates outcomes.
- **Be Present and Listen:** District and school leadership must be visible and present. Avoiding staff due to the discomfort of their pain or anger hinders relationship-building.

Listen actively, be present, and acknowledge that leadership may not always have the answers—and that is OK.

- **Continuous Reflection:** Needs will evolve constantly. Establish a culture of reflection where you are always observing, asking, and adjusting support systems to meet the changing needs of the adults in the building.
- **Wellness Committee:** Form a committee made up of staff members to design interventions and provide a consistent outlet for staff voice.
- **Operational Relief:** Utilize building substitutes to cover planning and PLC meetings, providing teachers with the time and space necessary for recovery and processing.
- **Wellness Programming:** Offer diverse wellness activities—ranging from yoga and meditation to social mixers and communal meals—to foster connection and combat compassion fatigue.
- **Clinician Access:** Provide access to trauma-informed clinicians for individual and group support sessions.



"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

Testimonial: Attending to the Ongoing Needs of Students and Staff



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



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," "commemoration," 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 cause anxiety. You may consider having extra adult support (volunteers, mental health professionals, retired teachers) on hand for these events. Also make it optional for staff who were on campus at the time of the tragedy. It may be retraumatizing for certain staff members to attend or participate.
- Commemorations are usually best served as internal and private events. Proactively communicate with the community and media to prevent external involvement.
 - » Include students who were there when the tragedy occurred but have graduated.
- 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 wellness and gratitude activities and 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.
- Planning for annual remembrances must 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 with the opportunity to give input on artwork, plaques, sacred spaces, or any other structure or space being constructed.
- » Consult your district office on memorial planning and take into account other 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.

Items Received

Displaying the Items

- **School Grounds:** Banners, posters, and memorabilia were widely hung in hallways, on lockers, in classrooms, and around the flagpole to welcome students and staff back.
- **Targeted Areas:** Staff cards, flowers, and baked goods were placed in staff lounges or workrooms. Student cards and specific support items were often kept in counseling centers.
- **Timeline:** Displays lasted anywhere from a couple of weeks to the end of the school year. In some cases, items were kept up until students or staff requested their removal.

Management, Screening, and Organization

- **Vetting and Filtering:** Several schools screened items for appropriateness before displaying them.
- **Dedicated Teams:** Dedicated teacher groups or hired staff (such as a paraprofessional) were tasked with opening, organizing, tracking, storing, and writing thank-you notes.

- **Centralization:** When schools were operating virtually, items were redirected to the district's central office.

Removal, Disposal, and Archiving

- **Addressing Retraumatization:** As schools realized that continuous displays could be retraumatizing for students and staff, they transitioned to slowly removing and archiving the articles.
- **Resource and Space Constraints:** Due to the overwhelming volume of physical gifts (stuffed animals, signs, etc.), some schools ran out of storage space, using empty classrooms to hold items.
- **Disposal and Categorization:** Because schools lacked the resources to vet every item, some had to dispose of cards or ask the community via social media to only send banners. Others created strict sorting categories: items to keep/use, donate, or kindly discard.

Locations

Common Outdoor Locations on Campus

- **School Entrance and Signage:** Memorials were frequently set up at the front of the school, around the school's marquee, or decorated directly onto the school sign.
- **Fences:** Temporary, student-led displays were created on perimeter fences (such as using cups to spell out supportive messages) or at major intersections just outside the school fence line.
- **Flagpoles and Courtyards:** Items were placed near campus flagpoles or, in the case of permanent structures, built in specific areas like a campus mini courtyard outside the gym.

Off-Campus and Community Locations

- **Nearby Parks and Amphitheaters:** Some memorials and vigils were hosted offsite in the surrounding town, such as at a nearby community park or a local town amphitheater.

Some PRN schools had permanent, off-campus memorials built but never funded by the district.

Indoor or Alternative Tributes

- **Display Cabinets:** In instances where no permanent outdoor memorial was built, some schools chose to honor victims indoors by displaying student photographs in dedicated display cabinets.

No Memorials Set Up

- **Absence of Memorials:** A few PRN members noted that their schools did not set up any temporary or permanent on-site memorials following the event. This was due to the nature of the event and based on the needs of the students/community.

Removal

Timeline of Removal

- **Within Weeks:** Some items, such as flagpole memorials or certain banners, were taken down after a few weeks or before the school reopened for full-day sessions.
- **A Few Months/Mid-Year:** Other displays remained up for a few months but were removed when students requested it (e.g., after winter break) or as posters naturally began to fall over time.

- **End of the School Year:** A common milestone for total removal was the end of the current school year, ensuring a fresh start before the next school year.
- **Prior Notice:** One PRN school's leadership utilized social media to share photos of the memorial setup and gave the community a week's notice before relocating the items to protect them from the elements.

Storage and Archiving

- **District and School Storage:** Many items were packed away and stored in school district warehouses, local school building storage, or repurposed empty rooms.
- **Community Partnerships:** Several schools partnered with outside entities for preservation, transferring items to a public library archive, a local university, or a local business for long-term storage.

Distribution, Donations, and Tributes

- **Given to Families:** Items featuring the names and faces of victims were frequently delivered directly to their families.
- **Staff Keepsakes:** Teachers and staff were sometimes permitted to keep specific banners or cards if they wished.



"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

- **Charitable Donations:** Usable items, such as books and new stuffed animals, were donated to local children's hospitals or other organizations in memory of the victims.

Discreet Disposal and Transformation

- **Secure Disposal:** To respect the nature of the items and avoid public distress, some schools discretely discarded materials in ways that prevented anyone from pulling them out of the trash.
- **Creative Preservation:** In a unique approach to managing items that couldn't be kept or thrown away, one school delicately broke down and repurposed the materials, placing them beneath the turf of a playground area as a hidden, permanent tribute.

Commencement

Summary of Commencement Recognitions and Tributes

Schools approach commencement ceremonies following a tragedy by balancing public tribute with the families' and students' comfort levels. Immediate and future graduation milestones are typically managed through three main approaches:

- **Ceremonial and Symbolic Tributes:** Tragedies are often acknowledged subtly through speeches emphasizing resilience rather than traumatic details. Physical tokens of remembrance are frequently used on stage, including placing class flowers or single roses on designated empty chairs, setting up memorial wreaths, or presenting families with shadowboxes and replica diplomas (either publicly or in private office meetings).
- **Student-Led Choices for Normalcy:** Many graduating classes actively request a traditional celebration that focuses strictly on their academic achievements rather than the tragedy. Consequently, some schools make no formal changes to the ceremony or choose to generalize the hardships overcome by the student body.

- **Age-Dependent and Institutional Adjustments:** Underclassmen or elementary-aged victims are often honored only when their specific cohort reaches graduation age years later. For younger students where graduation doesn't apply, schools instead focus on non-traumatizing community activities like "JOY Days" to reclaim the calendar date positively.

Yearbook Additions (Year of the Event or Future Years)

- **Dedicated Memorial Pages and Sections:** The most common tribute was dedicating a special page, a beautiful multi-page spread, or an entire section to honor the victims. These layouts often include photographs, memories, and expressions of gratitude for community support.
- **Administrative and Placement Decisions:** Yearbook committees typically designed these memorial features with administrative approval. One PRN school chose not to include the victims' photos in the standard "senior pictures" section, opting instead for a standalone tribute page.
- **Ongoing and Future Tributes:** In the years following the event, some schools allowed parents to purchase or place custom remembrance advertisements for their children.
- **No Mentions:** Multiple PRN schools indicated that nothing was added regarding the event. Again, due to the nature of the event/or the needs of the students/staff, the event was not acknowledged in the yearbook.
- When planning commemorations and annual remembrances, administrators are strongly advised to keep events as simple as possible to ensure long-term sustainability and to avoid the difficult dilemma of deciding when to end elaborate traditions.
 - » It is crucial to thoughtfully engage key stakeholders—especially the student body and victims' families—while prioritizing

the developmental needs of the children to ensure that public tributes do not inadvertently trigger or retraumatize staff and students.

- » Ultimately, trust your own instincts and common sense, remaining mindful that as

original staff members turn over, collective campus remembrance often naturally and gracefully transitions into deeply personal, quiet reflections.

Years Since Tragedy	Summary of Actions Taken by Schools
Year 1	Community Service and Giving Back: Organized dedicated days/afternoons of service, wellness, gratitude, and volunteering to give back to supporting communities. Events and Ceremonies: Held public assemblies, marking events, blood drives, and first responder breakfasts. Alternative/No School: Closed school or attended communitywide events (e.g., botanical garden trips). Normalcy: Continued “business as usual” or moved on.
Year 5	Continued Tributes: Held planned public commemorations or specific moments of silence. Service Maintenance: Continued districtwide half-days or voluntary non-academic days of service and love. Minimal or No Action: Many schools transitioned to “nothing” or were not yet at this anniversary mark.
Year 10	Milestone Tributes: Held larger formal public commemorations specifically marking the decade. Ongoing Service: Sustained identical ongoing initiatives like the voluntary “Day of Service and Love.” Diminished Response: Most respondents noted doing nothing, while several schools had not reached this milestone.
15+ Years	Major Milestones Only: Kept public commemorations restricted to major milestones (e.g., years 15, 20, and 25). Systemic Continuity: Maintained standard recurring districtwide themes of service rather than campuswide trauma events. Phased Out: For most, formal actions had completely stopped, or the school hadn’t reached this point.



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



Listening to Student, Family, Staff, and Community Voice

- Student voice must be heard and incorporated throughout the entirety of the school's recovery process. 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 create space and time for any physically injured students to feel heard and supported with any of their unique needs.
- It is important to ask for student opinions and find out what causes students stress, anxiety, and other emotional responses.
- Some students may express a desire for "normalcy" with additional supports. Remember, they are children who want a joyful and safe school experience. Creating moments of fun and togetherness can be helpful.
- 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 must be consulted on developmentally appropriate conversations with students.
- As new students enroll in the school in years after the tragedy, it is important their voices are heard as well. How students choose to honor the victims of the tragedy may differ as time goes on, and it is important to continually involve students in those conversations and decisions.
- Create opportunities for all stakeholders to provide input throughout the decision-making process. It's important that parents, students, community members, and the families of victims feel that their voices are heard and their perspectives are thoughtfully considered. Recognize that consensus may not always be possible, and that different groups may have differing needs, opinions, and expectations.

Establish a clear process for making final decisions, and communicate those decisions transparently, along with the rationale behind them, to all affected parties.

- Understand that needs, perspectives, and preferences will evolve over time. Regularly seek input from stakeholders, particularly when considering significant decisions such as memorials, commemorations, or other forms of remembrance. What feels appropriate or meaningful in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy may change as individuals and the community continue to heal. Ongoing engagement helps ensure that decisions remain responsive to the needs and sentiments of those most affected.
 - Consider establishing advisory groups or committees representing each stakeholder group to streamline the process of gathering input and feedback. Each group should identify a representative, spokesperson, or facilitator who can communicate the perspectives, concerns, and priorities of its members. Existing structures, such as student government organizations for students or faculty councils for staff, may serve as effective channels for engagement. A representative approach can help ensure that diverse voices are heard while making the input-gathering process more organized and manageable.
 - Develop and maintain strong relationships with your law enforcement partners, and meet regularly to discuss safety planning, communication protocols, and response procedures. Establishing these relationships before a crisis occurs can help ensure a coordinated and timely response when threats, swatting incidents, or other safety concerns arise.
- » It is also important to communicate the unique sensitivities and history of your school community so that law enforcement can incorporate those considerations into their response plans. A shared understanding of the community's experiences can help inform decisions, minimize unnecessary distress, and support a more trauma-informed approach when managing these incidents.
 - Timely and transparent communication is critical when threats or swatting calls occur. Consider developing communication templates in advance that can be quickly adapted to the specific situation, allowing information to be shared promptly with staff, students, and families. Having pre-established messaging can help reduce delays and ensure consistent communication during rapidly evolving events.
 - » It is also beneficial to implement an internal communication platform for staff, enabling leaders to provide real-time updates and maintain clear lines of communication throughout an incident. Because threats and swatting calls can cause anxiety, fear, or retraumatization, particularly in communities that have experienced previous violence, frequent and reliable communication can help individuals feel informed, supported, and connected. Visible and responsive leadership during these situations can foster trust and provide reassurance during times of uncertainty.



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



Managing School Safety Improvements and Other Future Considerations

- Unfortunately, schools that have suffered shootings often become the targets for swatting, threatening phone calls or other communications, and hoaxes in the wake of their tragedies.
 - » Create detailed plans at the school and district levels for handling these incidents, working closely with local law enforcement.
- Conducting safety drills post-event requires school leaders to work with local and state leaders to meet requirements while remaining trauma informed.
 - » All drills should be announced in advance, communicated calmly by leadership, and followed by check-ins to prevent retraumatization.
 - » Work with school counselors to provide support before and after safety drills for staff and students. Drills may need to be modified.
 - » Be mindful when scheduling safety drills, particularly around dates and times that may coincide with or closely resemble those associated with the tragedy. Conducting a drill near a significant anniversary or at a time that mirrors the original event may unintentionally cause distress or retraumatization for students and staff. Thoughtful planning can help balance safety preparedness with the emotional well-being of the school community.
- School leaders must be prepared to navigate potential court proceedings following an event, which could include criminal and civil proceedings.
 - » Consider inviting a lawyer to answer faculty questions about the proceedings.
 - » Provide a way for staff to receive information concerning trials. Receiving the information updates should be voluntary, as not all staff may wish to know the information.
 - » Update staff prior to information being made public, if possible, as social media and word-of-mouth can create issues and spread misinformation.
 - » School staff should not show coverage of trials to students during the school day or after-school events.
 - » Plan for substitutes if teachers are called to be witnesses, and plan for additional coverage if administrators are called.

- ♦ Preparation for testimony for staff can also be extremely emotionally taxing. Schools must have a plan in place for access to emotional and mental health support before, during, and after staff testimony.
- » Ask that the school and community be given advanced notice when court decisions are being made so they can prepare for reactions that will ripple through the community, especially in the event of a potential verdict in a criminal trial.
- » Have your school HR department talk with staff about how to handle days off if they are subpoenaed or asked to attend court dates.
- » Working collaboratively with court liaisons and partnering with a victim advocate is an effective strategy to ensure that the needs of victims are prioritized throughout the legal process and that additional emotional support is available when needed.
- After a shooting event, school communities may discuss hardening the school environment.
 - » School leaders must understand that this can be perceived as reactive and prompt questions of why more hardening measures were not taken before the incident.
 - ♦ School district and school leaders must be on the same page when answering this question.
 - » The shooting event destroys a learning environment; hardening the environment may be necessary for students and staff to begin rebuilding it.
 - » School leaders must consider student and staff voices, as well as the community voice, as hardening decisions are made.
 - » When adding hardening procedures, such as weapons detection, policies must be implemented at the district and school levels. These policies include who will supervise the use of the new safety procedure and what the consequences are when contraband is detected.
- ♦ It is important to realize that when completing weapons screening, other contraband may be discovered. A policy needs to outline the consequences if such items are found.
- » Along with hardening the school, school leaders must look at strategies for “heartening” the school.
 - ♦ Consider implementing intentional social-emotional lessons that are presented to students on a structured, routine basis.
 - ♦ Consider training teachers in trauma-informed practices.
- Future school shootings have the potential to severely retraumatize your school. School leaders must have a plan in place to respond and provide additional support to students and staff when news breaks of other tragedies.
 - » Consider offering an optional support session for staff before the school day begins or after it ends. Staff often find comfort and strength in one another, and providing a space for connection and support can help address feelings of retraumatization and reinforce a sense of community during challenging times.



Conducting our first safety drills after the tragedy we experienced was difficult; even the routine fire drills were hard. I felt the weight of it—the responsibility to keep everyone safe, the awareness of what these drills now meant, and the knowledge that many of my students and staff carried a different kind of heaviness than they did before. We prepared our students thoughtfully. We checked in with one another. **We acknowledged that this was hard, and we did it anyway—together.** We didn't rush through them or treat them as routine in a way that dismissed what they meant. And we didn't dwell on them in a way that deepened trauma. All our drills were known well in advance, and it would be my voice heard over the PA system, calmly talking about what we were preparing to do—together.

Additionally, the most complex phase of leadership occurred not immediately after the tragedy, although there were significant challenges at this time, but during the prolonged criminal trial of the shooter, who was also a student. While the school continued to function, teach, and grow, the ongoing legal process created repeated disruptions to healing that demanded intentional, adaptive leadership.

In our case, the trial extended over two years at our local courthouse, roughly one mile away from the front door of the school, on our town square. Each new court development or wave of media coverage reopened emotional wounds, reigniting grief, fear, and anger within the school community. Just as students and staff began to stabilize and regain a sense of normalcy, renewed attention to the case would pull the focus back to the trauma. Leadership during this period required acknowledging these setbacks while continuing to guide the school community forward, understanding that progress and regression often occurred simultaneously.

Effective leadership during an active trial must be grounded in empathy, visibility, and consistent communication. **Recovery is never linear, especially when legal proceedings remain unresolved.** Ongoing access to counseling supports, space for honest and developmentally appropriate conversations, intentional support for staff carrying both professional and personal trauma, and the intentional practice of predictable routines were essential to sustaining stability. Leading a school under these conditions requires patience, transparency, and an unwavering commitment to human connection, recognizing that growth often occurs alongside renewed pain rather than in its absence. Those relationships we build prior to an act of school violence are so critical to the overall recovery efforts.

—Andy McGill, former assistant principal
West Liberty-Salem High School
West Liberty, OH



Photo by Skyler Ballard/Education Week

"The Guide to Recovery was developed and written by principals from across the country who have one thing in common: we have led through tragedy and recovery. We lead different types of schools and live in different communities, but we quickly realized that trauma is trauma no matter where it occurs. I've worked with many principals who have used this Guide to navigate post-tragedy events and decision-making, and I am proud to support all my colleagues as a member of the Principal Recovery Network."

—Patricia Greer, former principal
Marshall County High School
Benton, KY



If you are a school leader who has experienced gun violence in your building, the PRN is here to support you. Send a message to advocacy@principals.org, and National Principals Association staff will connect you with a PRN member. For additional resources, please visit principals.org/prn.

