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## Permanent Memorials in Public Schools: A Brief Overview

Our counsel and that of other leaders in the field, regarding Permanent Memorials, is that this is not about grief and loss, it is about managing traumatic aftermath (years that follow a loss) in school settings.

In public schools, time-limited, spontaneous memorials are good! Scholarships in the name of a well-loved deceased student or staff are also good! But permanent memorials, over time, can and have unintended and potentially harmful social-emotional impacts for those connected to the school community.

Grief, loss, and trauma are difficult challenges, and every individual and family should be free to chart their own course of response and recovery from such profound experiences. Schools, however, are not like a family in this regard. The complexion of a school is one that is not only comprised of a diverse population of students and staff, but also of an ever-changing student population as some youth age out of the building while other, new members enter in. As such, it is incumbent upon the school's leadership to consider, after a tragic loss has occurred, what will be most helpful and not hurtful for the entire system—both currently and in the future. In other words, how do we express compassion for current losses while also weighing out how our current response will impact students in the months or even years that follow.

Too often, in the past, well-meaning school leaders have allowed grieving families to place permanent memorials on school property or within the walls of the building with the intention of offering comfort and respect in the moment—but not calculating how, as months and years go by, these memorials often become traumatic stimuli for some students and staff, while for others they become a trigger for their own losses that may (or may not) be similar.

Consider also that not every decedent in a school community is as equally well-known or held in the same esteem. For example, many permanent memorials have been exacted for athletes or ‘popular’ students while other youth are left “un-memorialized” due to disparities such as race, gender, social station, or even because families lack the economic means to buy and place a memorial in a school or on school property. These painful, (and often silent) divides can, therefore, create inadvertent dissension - something public education, in its Best Practice toward equitable and inclusive environments, is actively working to eliminate.

Underscoring all of these things, (and many more not mentioned) is the fact that no school can predict what their future will bring. Many schools started off with one well-meaning permanent memorial never imagining that two years later three more students would die in a car crash or that a suicide every year for five years would occur. As such, there are schools that have amassed so many memorials that students and staff—both consciously and unconsciously—avoid the areas within which these memorials are contained; this part of the school will feel grim or somber at best, or like traumatic stimuli at worst. The multigenerational avoidance gets handed down to new students and staff...to the degree where they

don't even know *why* they don't encroach on that part of the school—only that "we just don't go there." That is *not* honoring those we have lost.

As noted in the aftermath of the discovery of 215 bodies at the former Kamloops Residential School, "Every Child Matters"—meaning that every child should be treated with the same reverence in both life and death. Clearly, as discussed, permanent memorials can be the *antithesis* of equality. They are a complex issue that demand consideration far beyond just the 'moment in time' of the loss to consider. Schools should not, therefore, be left to make these decisions—or to respond, at the site-based level, to permanent memorial requests. Rather, clear policy and procedures from school boards, superintendents or their equivalents, should proscribe permanent memorials in favor of other, more transient acknowledgements (such as the aforementioned scholarships) which can, and are, a more helpful and not hurtful way by which we can celebrate the memory of those whose lives we have lost.