

December 10, 2012

**Contacts:**  
Arielle Densen  
202-543-1258  
[adensen@tillerllc.com](mailto:adensen@tillerllc.com)  
Tom Lansworth  
202-393-6351  
[tlanswor@aft.org](mailto:tlanswor@aft.org)  
Lacey Siegel  
212-576-7937  
[lacey\\_s\\_siegel@newyorklife.com](mailto:lacey_s_siegel@newyorklife.com)

**Grief in the Classroom:**

**GROUNDBREAKING SURVEY OF EDUCATORS SHOWS OVERWHELMING INTEREST  
IN HELPING GRIEVING STUDENTS – AND STRONG DEMAND FOR TRAINING, MORE SUPPORT**

---

**Large Need, Scant Resources: While 7 in 10 Classroom Teachers Have a Student Who Lost Someone Close in the Past Year, Only 7% Have Ever Received Bereavement Training**

---

**American Federation of Teachers/New York Life Foundation First-Ever Bereavement Survey  
Finds Childhood Grief Is Often Overlooked By Schools, School Systems**

- 92% of educators – including teachers, teacher assistants, counselors and staff – say childhood grief is a serious problem that deserves more attention from schools
  - 50% of classroom teachers gave their school a grade of C or lower for the job it does in helping them support grieving students
  - More than two in five teachers say their school pays more attention to the way students are dressed than to student grief
- 

**The Training and Continuing Education Gap:**

- 93% of classroom teachers say they've never received bereavement training; only 3% say their school or district offers it
  - Less than half of educators report that their school has a protocol for how to respond when a student experiences the death of someone close
  - What might hinder educators from supporting grieving students? Insufficient training and/or professional development most frequently cited (by 63% of teachers)
-

**AFT Leader: “The encouraging news is that teachers, paraprofessionals, and counselors alike all have profound awareness of the problem and a heartfelt interest in helping grieving kids.”**

---

**AFT/New York Life Foundation Provide Insights, Resources for Educators**

---

**Washington D.C and New York City**, Dec. 10, 2012 – America’s teachers are keenly interested in helping the large number of grieving students in their classrooms but express a strong need for more training and resources regarding child bereavement, according to the results of a groundbreaking survey released today by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the New York Life Foundation.

Of the classroom teachers surveyed, almost seven in 10 (69%) reported having at least one student in their class(es) who had lost a parent, guardian, sibling or close friend in the past year. The vast majority of classroom teachers said they had interactions over the past year with a student who had lost a parent, guardian, sibling or close friend at some point in their lives. Those teachers reported, on average, interacting over the last year with eight students who had experienced such a loss.

Unfortunately, losing a loved one is an all-too-common childhood occurrence – with a typically profound impact. In a New York Life Foundation general population survey of 1,006 adults conducted in late 2009, one in seven respondents reported losing a parent or sibling before the age of 20. Specifically among adults who lost a parent growing up, more than half (57%) said they would trade a year of their life for one more day with their parent and 73% believe their life would have been “much better” if their parent hadn’t died so young.

“Childhood bereavement is poignant and powerful in its effects, and remarkably common yet woefully under-addressed,” said AFT Executive Vice President Francine Lawrence. “America’s schools reflect this dynamic. The encouraging news is that teachers, paraprofessionals and counselors alike all have profound awareness of the problem and a heartfelt interest in helping grieving kids. But as our survey clearly demonstrates, they are generally not receiving the training, encouragement and resources they need to support a student who has suffered a loss.”

Clearly, societal attitudes play a major role. “Putting the survey in context, the fact is our society is uncomfortable with death and uneasy with grief, particularly when it’s a child who is grieving,” said David Schonfeld, MD, director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement and a consultant on the survey. “Grieving kids are quick to pick up on that. Afraid to burden their family with their grief, they frequently suffer in silence. The result can be a painful range of emotional, psychological and behavioral difficulties. The data are a clarion call for all of us who care about

kids – both inside and out of school – to give the issue of childhood grief the time, resources and attention it so clearly deserves.”

Hart Research Associates conducted the survey of 1,253 AFT members, including 813 classroom teachers as well as 440 teaching assistants, guidance counselors, school psychologists and support staff. The AFT is the nation’s second largest union of educators. Interviewing was conducted online from October 8 through October 27, 2012.

“When it comes to childhood grief, too many children grieve alone for far too long,” said Chris Park, president of The New York Life Foundation, which underwrote the survey. “We can’t eliminate their grief journey, but maybe we can ease the path. Schools can play a critical role in that regard.”

In a project that began earlier this year, the AFT is partnering with the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement and the New York Life Foundation to evaluate a program for providing bereavement training to educators at six AFT affiliates across the country. The two-year project is supported with a grant from the Foundation.

### **The Classroom Perspective: Loss Frequently Begets Academic, Behavioral Issues**

Survey results attest to the effects of grief on children at school.

Asked specifically about students who have lost a parent or guardian, two-thirds (67%) of classroom teachers report that they “always” or “usually” witness a negative impact on academic performance. Teachers report that these students typically exhibit difficulty concentrating in class (observed by 87% of teachers), withdrawal/disengagement and less classroom participation (82%), absenteeism (72%), and a decrease in quality of work (68%).

“Grief doesn’t resolve itself overnight—certainly not emotionally, and often not academically either,” observed Bonnie Bistarkey, president of the Charlotte County Support Personnel Association, an AFT affiliate in Florida where school staff and teachers took part in child bereavement training in August, 2012.

Behavioral setbacks, while less frequent than academic ones, are also regularly observed among students grieving a parent or guardian. More than one-third of classroom teachers (36%) report that they “always” or “usually” witness new or increased behavioral problems. The majority of classroom teachers attest that students who have lost a parent or guardian exhibit depression/sadness (observed by 79% of teachers), withdrawal/isolation (observed by 73%), and anger (observed by 63%).

Among high school educators, 42% reported that they have witnessed self-destructive behavior in students who had lost a parent or guardian and 38% reported having witnessed increased risk-taking, such as the use of alcohol or drugs.

“The loss of a close family member or friend is a life-changing event. Even though children generally can return to active learning within a couple weeks or months after a personal loss, they are not ‘over it,’” Dr. Schonfeld said. “Children who are actively grieving generally find it hard to concentrate or retain new information when they are distracted by thoughts or worried about their loss, and because they often have difficulty sleeping, they may come to class feeling exhausted.

“At home, grieving kids may feel compelled to put on a brave face in order to provide support to surviving parents and other family members who may be struggling themselves. But at school, they may not feel as constrained that way,” Dr. Schonfeld continued. “At the same time, grieving children might feel safer speaking with school staff, who typically have some emotional distance and therefore might be better positioned to answer questions and identify resources for support.”

#### **Among Teachers, Grief Training Is Scarce—But Desire for Training Is Abundant**

More than nine in 10 (93%) teachers reported never having received specific training on the subject of childhood bereavement. This means that while seven in 10 teachers have at least one student in their class(es) who experienced a close personal death within the past year, only seven percent of these teachers have received the training so critical to helping these vulnerable students.

Nearly all teachers enter their school systems without preparation for how to handle grief in the classroom. Seventy-seven percent of the teachers surveyed held graduate degrees, but their academic degree programs rarely include bereavement training. Only 1% of teachers received bereavement training as part of their coursework in college or graduate school.

This dearth of formal training creates an information gap on childhood bereavement that is left up to school districts to remedy—but most school systems have not embraced this task. Only 3% of teachers report that their school or school district offers any kind of training session on childhood bereavement. It is no surprise, then, that of the 7% of teachers who reported any training, almost half (46 percent) reported that they had sought it out themselves.

The endemic lack of training among educators does not correspond to a lack of desire for it—in fact, just the opposite is true. Only 43% of teachers agree that educators have the basic skills they need to support grieving students. And of the various factors that could hinder educators from supporting grieving students (including a busy schedule, personal inexperience/discomfort with grief, and poor communication), the hindrance most frequently cited in the survey was insufficient training and/or professional development (63% of classroom teachers).

“The first step in remedying a shortfall is to recognize it,” said Maeve Ward, who directed the study for Hart Research. “The data illustrate indisputably the strong interest across the school setting in helping students in grief.”

A resounding 89% of teachers agree that there should be a greater focus on training educators to support grieving students. More than nine in 10 teachers (93%) indicated that they would be likely to attend a two- or three-hour training session on child bereavement if it were offered at their school. The most popular preference among teachers was a session offered during an in-service or professional development day (selected by 69 % of teachers).

“The math is clear. During the week, kids spend as many of their waking hours in school as they do at home,” said Dr. Schonfeld. “In many ways, school becomes the public frame for their grief. Educators are literally on the ‘front lines’ of the childhood grief issue. We need to ensure they are better equipped and prepared to support grieving students.”

“No one is suggesting that we need to turn educators into grief counselors,” Lawrence said. “But for kids, much of life is all about school, which means that teachers and counselors have a huge opportunity to lend support. Sometimes help is as simple as the act of inquiring, lending a word of support or encouragement, or creating a little greater understanding and awareness in the classroom, lunch room or schoolyard. “

### **Training Makes a Measurable Difference in Teachers’ Responses to Student Grief**

The survey demonstrated that when grief training is implemented among educators, it has a measurable impact on the level of care that grieving students receive.

Teachers trained in childhood bereavement are significantly more likely than their untrained peers to collaborate and communicate when dealing with a grieving student. Trained teachers reported more frequently making contact with a grieving student’s parent or guardian, collaborating with other staff members at their school, reaching out to a grieving student’s new teacher at the beginning of a school year, and referring grieving students to resources within the school and community.

Training also affects teachers' attitudes toward grieving students. Teachers who've received bereavement training are three times less likely than their peers to report "always" or "usually" feeling guilty that they have not helped their grieving students, and twice as unlikely to report "always" or "usually" feeling frustrated that they do not know how to help. They are also less likely to feel insecure and hesitant when it comes to reaching out to grieving students.

### **You Got to Have Friends**

Friendships are incredibly important to kids in their healing journey – and the data bear this out.

Eighty-eight percent of teachers believe that the support of classmates and friends is important to a grieving student's healing process. Almost half of teachers (47%) report that a grieving student's classmates come to them for guidance about how to respond in the wake of a death.

"Loss can separate a student from peers just at a time when children desperately feel the need to fit in," said Susan Kitchell, a nurse at Galileo High School in San Francisco. "Educators can play an important role in a grieving child's life by helping friends and classmates understand what is happening." Kitchell helped coordinate bereavement training earlier this fall sponsored by the United Educators of San Francisco as part of the AFT-New York Life Foundation project.

### **Childhood Bereavement Resources in Schools, Communities Lacking**

The survey revealed that most schools suffer from a dearth of resources for childhood bereavement. Only four in 10 classroom teachers surveyed felt that there were sufficient resources available at their school for helping students cope with grief.

When resources are lacking in schools, teachers also reveal that few options exist for referring their grieving students elsewhere. Nearly eight in 10 teachers (78%) said that they did not know of any outside bereavement resources for children in their area. And an even larger majority feels that there is a need for that service: nine in 10 teachers said they would be likely to refer their grieving students to a local outside bereavement resource if they knew of one that was qualified to work with children.

"These findings show just how widespread the need is for resources – both in school and in the greater community," said Park. "There is a huge opportunity for both school systems and community organizations to do much more in raising the bar for the support that grieving students receive."

## Resources for Loss

Both the AFT and New York Life Foundation can help meet the need for and interest in bereavement resources documented by the survey.

The New York Life Foundation has a Website, [www.AChildInGrief.com](http://www.AChildInGrief.com), which offers additional informational and educational resources for parents, kids, educators, and the public regarding loss. Those resources include the National Bereavement Resource Guide and “After a Loved One Dies – How Children Grieve,” a downloadable brochure offering advice and guidance to parents and other caregivers as they help children cope with their grief and fear following a death in the family. For more information, please visit [www.AChildInGrief.com](http://www.AChildInGrief.com).

The AFT also offers a Web-based collection of resources for children, parents and educators. With a special emphasis on helping teachers and other school staff assist grieving students, the materials include guidelines for responding to a variety of losses within the school community. Resources also draw on other AFT partnerships. For more information, visit <http://go.aft.org/bereavement>.

\* \* \* \*

### **About the American Federation of Teachers**

The AFT represents 1.5 million pre-K through 12th-grade teachers; paraprofessionals and other school-related personnel; higher education faculty and professional staff; federal, state and local government employees; nurses and healthcare workers; and early childhood educators.

### **About the New York Life Foundation**

Inspired by New York Life’s tradition of service and humanity, the New York Life Foundation has, since its founding in 1979, provided more than \$155 million in charitable contributions to national and local nonprofit organizations. Through its focus on “Nurturing the Children,” the Foundation supports programs that benefit young people, particularly in the areas of educational enhancement and childhood bereavement. The Foundation also encourages and facilitates the community involvement of employees, agents, and retirees of New York Life through its Volunteers for Life program. To learn more, please visit the Foundation's Web site at [www.newyorklifefoundation.org](http://www.newyorklifefoundation.org).