



New York Life Foundation and American Federation of Teachers Grief in School survey: key findings and topline results

Hart Research Associates conducted online interviews about grief in the classroom, the emotional impact of COVID-19 on students and how prepared educators feel to address these needs among 675 AFT members from July 26 through August 18, 2020. Responses were gathered from 458 classroom teachers as well as 217 paraprofessionals, school nurses, counselors, psychologists, social workers and other school staff members.

Key findings

COVID-19 has significantly amplified the need for social and emotional support in our nation's schools.

- Of the educators surveyed, 26% report that a member of their school community (including direct family members of students, teachers or staff) had died from the coronavirus.
- Nearly all educators surveyed (95%) agree that social and emotional support for students has never been more important than it is now, including 75% who agree strongly.
- Three in four educators (75%) report that COVID-19 has opened their eyes to the immense impact of grief and loss, and 93% believe that the traumatic effects of the coronavirus on students will be felt long-term.
- Eighty-four percent of educators say that the coronavirus has made them more aware of the impact of "non-death related losses" on the students they serve.

Even before COVID-19, grief in the classroom was an all-too-common occurrence.

- Ninety-three percent of educators agree that childhood grief is a serious problem that deserves more attention from schools, and 87% agree with the statement that "over the past five years, it has become more common for students at my school to seek out emotional support from their teachers."
- Asked how many students each school year typically need their support due to the loss of a loved one, 87% of educators said at least one, and 25% said six or more.
- Over the course of their careers, 58% have experienced the death of a significant member of their school community; 50% have experienced the death of a staff member; and significant numbers have experienced the death of a student due to an accident (44%) or an illness (42%).

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Teachers and other school staff are deeply committed to helping grieving students during this challenging time, but they want and need additional support.

- Nearly all educators (95%) say that they would like to do more to help grieving students.
- However, only 15% of educators said they feel very comfortable addressing students' emotional needs—including anxiety, grief, and/or trauma—that have been caused or intensified by the coronavirus outbreak.
- Most educators report that they largely feel unprepared to help their students deal with the non-death-related losses that their students' families and loved ones are facing due to COVID-19 including long-term physical health challenges (79% feel unprepared), mental health challenges (78% feel unprepared) and financial insecurity (78% feel unprepared).
- Separate from the coronavirus, barely a quarter (24%) say that they feel very comfortable offering support to a student who suffers the loss of someone close to them.

Educators identify training for addressing students' grief as a top priority, especially now.

- Ninety-two percent of educators think that there should be a greater focus on training educators to support grieving students, and 91% say that they personally would be interested in participating in bereavement training offered through their school or district.
- Eighty-three percent think they would benefit from undergoing training to support students who are experiencing trauma triggered by "non-death related losses" from the coronavirus.
- Nine out of ten (89%) say that having resources on supporting students' social and emotional needs in a remote learning environment would be helpful to them.
- From a list of factors that might make it difficult to support grieving students, insufficient training is identified as by far the number-one barrier (59% choose it as one of their top three barriers from a list of ten).
- According to a 2012 survey by the New York Life Foundation and the American Federation of Teachers, educators trained in childhood bereavement are more likely than their untrained peers to collaborate and communicate when dealing with a grieving student. Trained teachers reported more frequently contacting 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.

	All	Teachers only
Man	16	18
Woman	82	80
Non-binary	1	1
Other	1	1

Topline results

Please note: all results are shown as percentages unless otherwise stated.

S1. Which of the following best describes your role at your school or in your school district?

	All	Teachers only
Classroom teacher	68	100
Paraprofessional, teacher assistant, or education assistant	11	-
School nurse	-	-
School psychologist	1	-
Guidance counselor	1	-
Social worker	1	-
Other	18	-
None, do not currently work in education	-	-

S2. How many years have you been working in this role?

	All	Teachers only
Less than a year	-	1
1 to 5 years	9	3
6 to 10 years	12	11
11 to 20 years	40	40
More than 20 years	39	45

1. How comfortable do you feel addressing students' emotional needs—including anxiety, grief, and/or trauma—that have been caused or intensified by the coronavirus outbreak?

	All	Teachers only
Very comfortable	15	10
Somewhat comfortable	50	49
Somewhat uncomfortable	26	30
Very uncomfortable	9	11
Total Comfortable	65	59
Total Uncomfortable	35	41

2. Please think about your school community, including teachers, staff, students, and their direct family members. Has a member of your school community died from COVID-19?

	All	Teachers only
Yes	26	27
No	39	39
Not sure	35	44

CONTINUE
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3ab. Understanding that the upcoming school year is a fluid situation and may not look the same in every state, please address the following question as best as you can given two different possible scenarios: in-person instruction, and remote or online instruction.

Personally speaking, what are your two biggest worries or concerns when it comes to supporting students' social and emotional needs when school resumes this fall? Please select your top two responses.

	All	Teachers only
Helping students cope with their "new normal" such as new family, school, and personal hygiene routines	51	52
Providing adequate support for students' specific personal circumstances	36	33
Navigating students' anxiety about returning to in-person instruction	32	35
Identifying which students need additional social and emotional support	26	25
Helping students manage "non-death related losses," such as parent job loss, illness, or loss of social interaction	24	24
Helping students understand differing viewpoints on social distancing	23	22
Identifying which students need additional bereavement support (specific to a COVID-19-related death of a loved one)	9	9

	All	Teachers only
Providing adequate support for students' specific personal circumstances	59	60
Identifying which students need additional social and emotional support	46	47
Helping students cope with their "new normal" such as new family, school, and personal hygiene routines	37	37
Helping students manage "non-death related losses," such as parent job loss, illness, or loss of social interaction	24	24
Navigating students' anxiety about returning to in-person instruction	17	18
Helping students understand differing viewpoints on social distancing	9	7
Identifying which students need additional bereavement support (specific to a COVID-19-related death of a loved one)	8	8

4. As you think about the upcoming school year (whether in person or remote), please rate how helpful you think each of the things listed below would be in terms of helping educators and school staff feel prepared to welcome students back.

	Total helpful	Total not helpful	Very helpful	Fairly helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not that helpful	Not applicable
Protocols for protecting the safety of students, educators, and school staff							
All	93	7	86	7	4	3	-
Teachers only	93	7	84	9	4	3	-
Protocols for when a student, educator or staff member in my school tests positive for the coronavirus							
All	92	7	86	92	92	92	92
Teachers only	92	8	86	92	92	92	92
Resources on supporting students' social and emotional needs in a remote learning environment							
All	89	11	75	89	89	89	89
Teachers only	88	12	73	88	88	88	88
Training to support students who are experiencing trauma triggered by "non-death related losses" from the coronavirus (e.g., parent job loss, illness, loss of social interaction)							
All	83	16	63	83	83	83	83
Teachers only	82	18	61	82	82	82	82
Language for coronavirus-related communications to families and parents							
All	80	18	54	80	80	80	80
Teachers only	80	19	53	80	80	80	80
Grief training to support students who have lost a loved one to the coronavirus							
All	78	20	54	78	78	78	78
Teachers only	77	22	50	77	77	77	77
Resources/tips on addressing complicated or delayed grief (such as the effects of not being able to mourn/grieve in person or hold a traditional funeral)							
All	76	23	48	76	76	76	76
Teachers only	74	25	45	74	74	74	74

5. Below is a list of some “non-death related losses” that students might be dealing with due to the coronavirus outbreak. Please indicate how prepared you feel to deal with each one

	Total prepared	Total not prepared	Very prepared	Fairly prepared	Just somewhat prepared	Not really prepared	Not applicable to me
A student with a family member or loved one with long-term physical health challenges related to COVID-19							
All	19	79	3	16	25	54	2
Teachers only	16	83	3	13	27	56	1
A student with a family member or loved one experiencing mental health challenges related to COVID-19							
All	20	78	4	16	26	52	2
Teachers only	16	83	2	14	26	57	1
A student whose family is experiencing financial insecurity because of COVID-19							
All	20	78	3	17	30	48	2
Teachers only	17	82	3	14	31	51	1
Students who are feeling uncertain about the future in the wake of COVID-19							
All	29	70	5	24	32	38	1
Teachers only	27	73	3	24	32	41	-
Students who are facing challenges related to the loss of rituals or milestones because of COVID-19							
All	32	67	5	27	33	34	1
Teachers only	30	70	4	26	32	38	-
Students who have moved or relocated to a different community because of COVID-19							
All	34	66	6	24	29	37	4
Teachers only	31	69	5	24	29	40	2
Students who are struggling with their connections to classmates and friends because of COVID-19							
All	34	65	6	28	36	29	1
Teachers only	31	69	4	27	36	33	-

6. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Total agree	Total disagree	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Social and emotional support for students has never been more important than it is now.						
All	95	5	75	20	4	1
Teachers only	95	5	72	23	4	1
The traumatic effects of the coronavirus on students will be felt long-term.						
All	93	7	66	27	6	1
Teachers only	93	7	62	31	6	1
Remote learning has made it difficult to identify grief-related emotions and behaviors among students.						
All	91	9	49	42	7	2
Teachers only	90	10	47	43	8	2
Remote learning has made it difficult to assess the social and emotional needs of students.						
All	89	11	55	34	9	2
Teachers only	87	13	53	34	11	2
The coronavirus should prompt permanent changes in our school's bereavement policies and procedures.						
All	87	13	50	37	12	1
Teachers only	86	14	49	37	13	1
Providing remote support to grieving students presents challenges that I don't feel prepared for.						
All	87	13	44	43	10	3
Teachers only	87	13	44	43	11	2
The coronavirus has made me more aware of the impact of "non-death related losses."						
All	84	16	38	46	12	4
Teachers only	85	15	37	48	12	3
The coronavirus has opened my eyes to the immense impact of grief and loss.						
All	75	25	32	43	19	6
Teachers only	75	25	29	46	20	5
The coronavirus has helped students better understand how their individual actions can impact others.						
All	56	44	8	48	34	10
Teachers only	57	43	8	49	34	9

7. *Outside of the coronavirus, in the time you have worked at your current school, have any of the following occurred in your school community? Please check all that apply.*

	All	Teachers only	
Death of a significant member of the school community (e.g., parent)	58	61	
Death of a school staff member	50	51	
Death of a student due to an accident (e.g., car accident)	44	47	
Death of a student due to an illness	42	45	CONTINUE
Traumatic event in the community not including COVID-19 (e.g., natural disaster)	40	41	
Death of student by suicide	30	32	
Death of a student due to a violent act (e.g., school shooting)	23	22	
None of the above	16	14	Skip to Q.9a

8. Is grief support made available to the entire student body following a loss that impacts the whole community (e.g., death of a student or staff member)?

	All	Teachers only
Yes	80	78
No	20	22

9a. Within a typical school year, how many grieving students need your support due to the death of a close loved one (e.g., parent, guardian, sibling, other close family member or close friend)?

	All	Teachers only
1 to 5 students	62	66
6 to 10 students	13	13
11 to 15 students	6	5
16 or more students	6	6
No students.	13	10
Total 6 or More Students	25	24

9b. Within a typical school year, how many grieving students need your support due to another loss that prompts mourning or grief (e.g., death of a public figure, celebrity, etc.)?

	All	Teachers only
1 to 5 students	48	51
6 to 10 students	12	11
11 to 15 students	4	4
16 or more students	7	8
No students	29	26
Total 6 or More Students	23	23

10. When a student experiences the death of a parent, guardian, sibling, or close friend, is the death noted on the student's permanent school record?

	All	Teachers only
Yes	9	10
No	14	16
Not sure	77	74

11a. Have you received any specific training on the subject of childhood bereavement?

	All	Teachers only	
Yes, received specific training	15	13	Skip to Q. 12a
No, did not receive specific training	85	87	CONTINUE

11b. What kind of bereavement training do you think would be helpful to receive? Select the TWO you think would be most helpful from this list.

	All	Teachers only
Session on childhood bereavement offered during an in-service or professional development day	75	76
Web-based training course or video	40	38
Conference or professional development event apart from workplace.	25	25
Session during professional orientation	23	25
As part of the certification/licensure process	17	16
As part of the academic process in graduate-level coursework	10	11
Collateral or other reading materials on bereavement	10	9

12a. Does your school or school district offer any kind of training on childhood bereavement?

	All	Teachers only
Yes, school offers training	2	2
Yes, school district offers training	8	5
Both school and district offer training	2	3
No, neither offers training	41	45
Not sure either way	47	45

12b. How interested are you personally in participating in a child bereavement training session through your school or district?

	All	Teachers only
Very interested	42	36
Somewhat interested	49	54
Not very interested	7	8
Not at all interested	2	2
Total Interested	91	90

13. Please rank which two topics below would be the most helpful to address during a bereavement training session.

	All	Teachers only
What to say/what not to say to grieving children	70	70
Identifying and understanding the social and emotional impact of grief	52	51
How to identify and address grief triggers (anniversaries, holidays, etc.)	30	32
Dealing with “non-death related losses” that might follow the death of a loved one	25	26
Guidance on school bereavement policies and procedures	22	21

14. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Total agree	Total disagree	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Grief can frequently have an adverse impact on learning at school.						
All	99	1	84	15	1	-
Teachers only	99	1	83	16	1	-
Students who experience a significant personal loss generally need more support in school over the long term.						
All	96	4	64	32	4	-
Teachers only	97	3	64	33	3	-
I would like to do more to help grieving students.						
All	95	5	58	37	4	-
Teachers only	95	5	58	37	4	-
In my experience, grieving students fare better in school when they receive support from their classmates and friends.						
All	95	5	53	42	4	1
Teachers only	95	5	54	41	4	1
Childhood grief is a serious problem that deserves more attention from schools.						
All	93	7	61	32	6	1
Teachers only	93	7	58	35	6	1
Students who experience a significant personal loss generally need more support in school than is available.						
All	92	8	58	34	7	1
Teachers only	92	8	58	34	7	1

	Total agree	Total disagree	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
There should be a greater focus on training educators to support grieving students.						
All	92	8	56	36	7	1
Teachers only	91	9	54	37	8	1
Over the past five years, it has become more common for students at my school to seek out emotional support from their teachers.						
All	87	13	44	43	11	2
Teachers only	87	13	44	43	10	3
I know where to turn to refer students to outside bereavement resources (support groups, local grief centers, etc.).						
All	56	44	19	37	23	21
Teachers only	52	48	15	37	24	24
Helping grieving students is not as high a priority at my school as I believe it should be.						
All	54	46	22	32	36	10
Teachers only	55	45	22	33	35	10

15. The following is a list of factors that might make it difficult for you to support grieving students. Please select up to three that you consider to be the biggest challenges for you personally.

	All	Teachers only
Insufficient training and/or professional development	59	59
Not knowing what to do/say to help	46	49
General lack of awareness/understanding of the impact of childhood grief	32	30
Insufficient communication/collaboration among staff	28	27
Worrying that I would hurt rather than help the student	27	26
Lack of community resources/referral network	24	26
Lack of support from administration	16	17
My personal discomfort with the subject of death	11	13
Thinking it isn't my place to support the student in that way	11	10
Feeling that I could not make a difference	6	5
Other	8	8

16. When a student in your school suffers a loss of a loved one or someone else they are close to, how comfortable do you feel offering support to them?

	All	Teachers only
Very comfortable	24	21
Somewhat comfortable	51	54
Somewhat uncomfortable	22	22
Very uncomfortable	3	3
Total Comfortable	75	75
Total Uncomfortable	25	25

17. Earlier in the survey, you indicated that you had direct interaction with at least one student who had experienced the death of a loved one. From the list below, please indicate any of the steps that you took to support them.

	All	Teachers only
Monitored the student for warning signs of serious struggles	69	71
Offered a private conversation with the student	68	68
Referred the student to other resources in the building	58	61
Attended the funeral/memorial service or paid a condolence call	46	46
Offered the student extra academic help	40	47
Sent a note or some other private expression of sympathy	38	40
Contacted the parent(s)/guardian(s) to see how they thought the student was doing	38	39
Tried to cheer the student up	34	36
Adjusted lessons or activities to avoid grief triggers	27	31
Notified the parent(s)/guardian(s) of what was being done at school to support the student	23	21
Developed a plan with the student about how to handle grief triggers	17	15
With the student's permission, spoke with classmates about how to support the student	17	18
Referred the student to outside bereavement resources	17	14
Facilitated emotional expression through class activities or projects	15	15
Treated the student no differently than prior to the loss	13	14

18. When a student undergoes a significant personal loss, do you take any measures to prepare your class to respond to and support that student?"

	All teachers/ paras	Teachers only	
Yes	63	21	CONTINUE
No	37	54	Skip to Q. 20

19. Which, if any, of the following measures have you found to be helpful in preparing a class to support a grieving classmate?

	All teachers/ paras
Offer students guidance on how to support their grieving classmate	64
Offer a private, one on one conversation for students who have questions or concerns	55
Encourage students to reach out to their grieving classmate	53
Hold a class discussion about the death before the student returns to class	48
Devote class time to creating an expression of support for the grieving student	48
Seek input from the students about how the class can commemorate their classmate's loss	38
Utilize a grief-related book for class discussion or read a grief-related book to my class	27
Make an announcement about the loss in class	22
Send home some type of communication to parent(s)/guardian(s) of other students in the class to notify them of the loss	19
Other	6

20. Please indicate whether the following protocols are in place at your school.

	Yes	No	Don't know
When a student experiences a loss, there is a protocol in place for someone at the school to reach out and communicate with a family member			
All	41	16	43
Teachers only	43	17	40
There is a protocol in place at our school to help staff members work collaboratively to support grieving students after a death occurs			
All	21	35	44
Teachers only	21	39	30
My school has a plan in place to provide remote support to grieving students			
All	16	26	58
Teachers only	17	28	55

21. Thinking about a student who has lost a loved one (e.g., parent, guardian, sibling, other close family member or close friend), which two or three of the following behavioral and emotional challenges that could arise do you feel like you would need the most help and support with in order to know how to respond?

	All	Teachers only
Depression/sadness	57	58
Withdrawal/isolation	54	55
Self-destructive behavior	42	44
Disruptive behavior/peer conflict	34	34
Anger	28	29
Increased risk taking, such as use of alcohol or drugs	23	22
Becoming "needy"/seeking attention	15	16
Immature behavior/acting younger	7	7
Less interest in extracurricular activities	7	6
Other	2	1
None of these	2	3

22. If you had to grade your school's overall job in supporting grieving students, what grade would you give it?

	All	Teachers only
A	8	7
B	26	25
C	30	30
D	18	21
F	4	4
Not sure	14	13
GPA	2.2	2.1
Total A/B	34	32
Total D/F	22	25

23. Do you feel that there are sufficient resources at your school for helping students cope with loss and grief?

	All	Teachers only
Yes	23	22
No	42	45
Not sure	35	33

24. How prepared do you think your school is to offer grief support in each of the following situations?

	Total prepared	Total somewhat/not prepared	Very prepared	Adequately prepared	Somewhat prepared	Not prepared
Death of a student due to violent act (e.g., school shooting)						
All	20	80	4	16	42	38
Teachers only	19	81	3	16	40	41
Death of a school staff member or parent/guardian due to substance misuse						
All	23	77	5	18	41	36
Teachers only	22	78	3	19	41	37
Death of student due to suicide						
All	26	74	6	20	38	36
Teachers only	23	77	5	18	40	37
Death of a school staff member						
All	30	70	7	23	42	28
Teachers only	29	71	7	22	41	30
Traumatic event in the community (e.g., natural disaster)						
All	31	69	8	23	48	21
Teachers only	30	70	6	24	48	22
Death of a significant member of the school community (e.g., parent)						
All	31	69	6	25	47	22
Teachers only	31	69	5	26	47	22
Death of a student due to accident (e.g., car accident)						
All	32	68	7	25	45	23
Teachers only	31	69	6	25	44	25
Death of a student due to illness						
All	33	67	7	26	43	24
Teachers only	32	68	6	26	43	25

25. Which, if any, of the following types of resources/support are available to grieving students at your school?

	All	Teachers only
Mental health specialists and/or counselors	65	67
A referral network/relationship with community resources	38	36
Crisis support plan that includes protocol for supporting grieving students	28	25
Pamphlets, other reading materials on bereavement for students	20	20
Peer bereavement support groups (virtual or in-person)	15	15
Digital resources/video	7	6
Other	4	4
Not sure if grief resources are available at my school	23	23
There are no resources for grieving students at my school	2	2

26a. At the beginning of a new school year, are you informed by the school about which students have experienced a recent death of a loved one?

	All	Teachers only
Yes	10	9
Sometimes	38	40
No	52	51

26b. At the beginning of a new school year, are you informed by the school about which students have experienced a death of a loved one at some point in their lives?

	All	Teachers only
Yes	5	4
Sometimes	30	31
No	65	65

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