



Category 1 (I): Innovative Program, Service, or Activity

Since 2014, Morris-Baker has organized and funded seminars focused upon various aspects of grief. One of these, our "Mourning at School" seminar, focused on loss and grief in schools and in other organizations that serve children.

Grief in children and the organizations that serve children are particularly important to us because a member of our ownership family experienced the loss of her father at a young age: In the spirit of "protection" she was excluded from her father's funeral service. This experience influenced her practice as a funeral director serving families with children, and she worked to make sure children were included in ways appropriate to their age.

When a student, teacher, or prominent community member dies, people often turn to the schools to inform the students and provide guidance. Sadly, grief is not part of the teaching curriculum and is barely covered in seminary, and hospice chaplains have told me that they often feel like they are making it up as they go along.

I was recently told of a local school that, with the best of intentions, informed a class of students that their classmate was absent because of an earache. The truth was that the student had a brain tumor and never returned. How do children reconcile what they have been told with the reality of their classmate never coming back? How do they react to their next earache? How scared must that teacher have been, thinking of what to say?

This session is our attempt to gather the teachers, counselors, pastors, volunteers, and other caregivers and give them access to a leading expert in grief who can provide them with the best tools available for those seemingly impossible tasks.

As our first speaker once said, grief education for schools is "escrow learning." When a crisis happens, a teacher can't hit the pause button so they can study up on grief. That knowledge must already be in the account ready to be withdrawn.

The program is scheduled on a Monday afternoon at a time chosen by the local school counseling community. It lasts two hours. Unfortunately, a longer absence is not feasible for that community. We also invite local hospices, the mental health system, local social worker, pastors, children's non-profits, and the community at large.

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Our speakers pack the two hours with subjects such as: age-appropriate grief responses, best practices for responding to the death of a student, death notification, age-appropriate memorial options for schools, and contingency plans for students returning to school after a loss.

The benefit to the community at large is that the community becomes better at responding to and supporting children dealing with grief. This, in turn, benefits families—parents and children. If just one pastor who attended the seminar encourages a family to include their child who wishes to participate in the funeral, there is positive impact upon that child. If one child receives proper support from their school counselor and does not begin trailing in academic performance, there is positive impact upon that child. If one teacher in attendance will inform their students of a death effectively instead of sheltering them from the truth, there is positive impact on those children.

The first and primary benefit to the funeral home is that it strengthens and empowers the community that we serve. Also, in providing this service, we are demonstrating and communicating our values: that we think our community is worth investing time and resources in, and that we are willing to plant this seed of knowledge in faith that it will one day bear fruit. It also benefits the staff in attendance and our entire staff when we encounter a loss in our own family, as we did last year. As well, it identifies our firm as being a part of the greater caregiving community.

Organizations and people key to the success of the program are the regional school systems (we invite them all), Frontier Health (our local mental health system), the United Way of Washington County, TN, and Donna Cherry of the Northeast Branch of the Tennessee Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. These organizations are invaluable for their access to our region's caregivers.

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