Sample Letters to Parents/Community on School Shootings

Lexington (SC) School District One

As you can expect based on the events in Connecticut, we are getting emails and calls from nervous parents seeking reassurance that that their child’s school is safe.

Lexington County School District One is committed to the safety and well-being of all our students at all times.

Every school has a detailed school safety plan which parents and other interested individuals are welcome to review and offer suggestions for improvement. We continue to review these plans annually in an effort to eliminate any oversights and to provide continuity throughout our schools.

We work closely with the Lexington County Sheriff’s Department and its resident deputies, the Town of Lexington Police and the Pelion Police Department to address our school communities’ needs regarding the safety of our schools.

We have School Resource Officers at all our middle and high schools and at the Lexington Technology Center.

However, our schools are just like the rest of the world. From time to time, something out of the ordinary happens — a student brings a weapon or drugs to school or a student threatens himself or another individual.

For that reason, each school has a comprehensive visitor check-in and check-out system located at the front desk in all schools designed to help ensure that no unauthorized person enters. This system runs a background check on each visitor every time he or she visits. Each visitor must check in and out when in a school, regardless of the time of day.

All visitors and volunteers must wear their name badges in plain sight at all times while on school grounds or at school-related events or activities. (Visitors are not, however, asked to check in and out using this system during large evening PTA/PTO meetings, school plays, programs, athletic events, etc.)

Schools lock exterior doors that do not have to remain unlocked and limit the number of access points. We are also renovating all schools’ entrances and making the front entrance a secure entrance. When someone enters a school with a secure entrance, that person must go into an office and is unable to enter the school without going through an office.

We have telephones in every classroom, including portables.

We added security cameras that can link to law enforcement at several schools and plan to add more. These allow for remote access during an emergency.

We have after-school programs or safe havens at most of our elementary schools.
The district’s school counselors and school psychologists use a series of staff development initiatives designed to help staff identify students at risk for violent behavior early and to teach staff appropriate interventions. Each teacher has a written guide to help them recognize early warning signals and tell them the steps to take if they are concerned about a student. They are reminded to stay alert to internal problems, to recognize potential warning signs and to react quickly to a crisis.

Guidance counselors and school psychologists in each school teach teachers how to use this guide.

We remind parents and staff how important it is to maintain open communication with children — about what they are seeing on television, about how they deal with anger and frustration, and about their relationships with other students. If parents feel free to talk with administrators and staff about their children’s problems and budding disputes within the student body, it will go a long way toward defusing tensions within the school.

We remind students that they have an obligation to themselves and to their classmates to bring information about dangerous situations to adults at the school so that we can respond quickly and appropriately to protect their safety. (The safety and well-being of their friends and classmates are more important than the issue of tattling or “narcing.”)

We remind parents and students that they can help make our schools safer, too, by not passing along the rumors they hear to their neighbors or friends; but, instead, reporting them to a school administrator who will then investigate and turn it over to the police, if necessary.

To remind our staff, students and parents that they have several tip lines they can use to report crimes. The district’s Tip Line telephone number is 803-821-1232 and the Crime Stoppers of the Midlands telephone number is 1-888-274-6372.
Anoka-Hennepin Schools, Coon Rapids, MN

Dear Parents and Guardians,

By now you may be heard about the tragic school shooting that occurred today at an elementary school in Connecticut. No doubt there will be extensive coverage of this on the news and much discussion about it in our communities in the coming days.

I want to assure you that safety of our students is our top priority and that our school has a comprehensive crisis plan in place to help avoid tragedies such as this. The plan is reviewed and updated annually.

I also want to share with you some tips from the National Association of School Psychologists for helping your children cope with news such as this.

What Parents Can Do:

1. Focus on your children over the week following the tragedy. Tell them you love them and everything will be okay. Try to help them understand what has happened, keeping in mind their developmental level.
2. Make time to talk with your children. Remember if you do not talk to your children about this incident someone else will. Take some time and determine what you wish to say.
3. Stay close to your children. Your physical presence will reassure them and give you the opportunity to monitor their reaction. Many children will want actual physical contact. Give plenty of hugs. Let them sit close to you, and make sure to take extra time at bedtime to cuddle and to reassure them that they are loved and safe.
4. Limit your child’s television viewing of these events. If they must watch, watch with them for a brief time; then turn the set off. Don’t sit mesmerized re-watching the same events over and over again.
5. Maintain a “normal” routine. To the extent possible stick to your family’s normal routine for dinner, homework, chores, bedtime, etc., but don’t be inflexible. Children may have a hard time concentrating on schoolwork or falling asleep at night.
6. Spend extra time reading or playing quiet games with your children before bed. These activities are calming, foster a sense of closeness and security, and reinforce a sense of normalcy. Spend more time tucking them in. Let them sleep with a light on if they ask for it.
7. Safeguard your children’s physical health. Stress can take a physical toll on children as well as adults. Make sure your children get appropriate sleep, exercise, and nutrition.
8. Consider praying or thinking hopeful thoughts for the victims and their families. It may be a good time to take your children to your place of worship, write a poem, or draw a picture to help your child express their feelings and feel that they are somehow supporting the victims and their families.
9. Find out what resources your school has in place to help children cope. Most schools are likely to be open and often are a good place for children to regain a sense of
normalcy. Being with their friends and teachers can help. Schools should also have a plan for making counseling available to children and adults who need it.

If you have concerns about your child’s reaction to this news, please contact ________(add name(s) of the most appropriate persons in your school).

Sincerely,
School District of Clayton (Mo.)

Dear Clayton Parents Guardians and Community Members:

We were deeply saddened to hear the news of the school shooting today at a Connecticut elementary school. Our thoughts are with the members of that community. The safety of our students is always the top priority in our District. We take seriously our responsibility to ensure the safety of your child every day.

I would like to take this opportunity to remind all of our families that we have a plan in place at each of our schools to handle emergency situations. We work with the Clayton police and fire departments to prepare for these types of emergencies and regularly practice our safety procedures with students and staff through discussions and emergency exercises. While no amount of planning can guarantee that a tragedy such as this will not occur, we are doing everything we know to keep students and staff safe while at school.

It is equally important for us to work with our staff and ensure they are prepared to support their students in difficult times. We took time this afternoon to update our staff on this tragic event and ensure that they have the resources they will need to respond to student questions next week. We will also have our counselors and administrators ready on Monday morning to respond to students as needed. As we learn more details about this tragic incident in the hours and days ahead, it will be important for you to spend time talking with your children and helping them cope with this news. I would like to share with you a list of tips from the National Association of School Psychologists about what parents can do at times like this:

1. **Reassure children that they are safe.** Emphasize that schools are very safe. Validate their feelings. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs. Let children talk about their feelings, help put them into perspective, and assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.

2. **Make time to talk.** Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient. Children and youth do not always talk about their feelings readily.

3. **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.**
   - **Early elementary school** children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them.
   - **Upper elementary and early middle school** children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools.
   - **Upper middle school and high school** students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. Emphasize the role that students have in maintaining safe schools by following school
safety guidelines communicating any personal safety concerns to school administrators, and accessing support for emotional needs.

3. **Review safety procedures.** This should include procedures and safeguards at school and at home. Help children identify at least one adult at school and in the community to whom they go if they feel threatened or at risk.

4. **Observe children’s emotional state.** Some children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can indicate a child’s level of anxiety or discomfort. In most children, these symptoms will ease with reassurance and time. However, some children may be at risk for more intense reactions. Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Seek the help of mental health professional if you are at all concerned.

5. **Limit television viewing of these events.** Limit television viewing and be aware if the television is on in common areas. Developmentally inappropriate information can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children. Adults also need to be mindful of the content of conversations that they have with each other in front of children, even teenagers, and limit their exposure to vengeful, hateful, and angry comments that might be misunderstood.

7. **Maintain a normal routine.** Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promote physical health. Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don’t push them if they seem overwhelmed.

As parents, we are troubled by events like what occurred in Connecticut. However, days like today also provide us with the opportunity to be leaders as we help our children to understand, also reminding them that, as the adults in their lives, we do everything we can to keep them safe. As we learn more details about today’s events, we will discuss and debrief with administrators and staff accordingly and be ready when your children return to school on Monday.

Sincerely,

Sharmon B. Wilkinson, Ed.D
Superintendent
Dear Parents and Guardians,

Our hearts and prayers are with the families of Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Today’s senseless shooting spree that killed at least 27 people, including 20 children, is not only heartbreaking but unconscionable.

We want you to know that the safety of our students and staff is the No. 1 priority of the Chandler Unified School District. Our commitment has included security fencing, with one-point of entry, and a requirement that all visitors check-in with our offices. Additionally, we are in the process of installing surveillance cameras at our schools and support buildings.

In partnerships with the Town of Gilbert and City of Chandler, we employ uniformed School Resource Officers, while the district also employs school Safety Officers. We meet with law enforcement officials monthly to review safety practices and routinely revise our crisis intervention plans for each school. Additionally, our campuses routinely practice lockdown drills that are advised and evaluated and approved by our officers.

Most importantly, we are attempting to promote a culture where everyone has a responsibility to be vigilant and focused on safety. We ask that you talk with your children about the importance of sharing with information that could be considered threatening to our community with a responsible adult.

In closing, we pledge to make safety our No. 1 priority and to take any threat seriously. We are anxious to review lessons learned from today’s terrible tragedy so that we can continue to be proactive.

Please join me in prayer and positive thoughts to the entire community of Newtown, Connecticut.

Respectfully,
Camille Casteel, Ed. D
Superintendent
Dear Parents:

Teachers, school administrators and support staff play an important role in helping students recover from traumatic events like the Sandy Hook tragedy. Simply returning to school promotes the welfare of children and families. District administration has met over the weekend to respond to the many parent messages, evaluate school safety procedures, and prepare information for teachers and staff in anticipation of our students return to school today.

In traumatic events, proximity to the event is an important factor in predicting reactions from students and staff. In general, those closest to the trauma are the most likely to have experienced psychological harm. While this event was literally hundreds of miles away from our community, the media coverage brought it into our homes and lives. Additionally, as educators, we can relate to the horror of this event as we try to place ourselves in the shoes of the teachers and principal who so valiantly sacrificed their lives to save children.

Because it is difficult to predict how anyone will react to a traumatic event, the best we can do is to be supportive and responsive to our students and their varied responses. Some students will have no reaction; some will be upset or anxious to some degree. Some may not have even heard of the event and others will have been immersed in the coverage on TV. We are prepared for a wide range of possible situations.

In general, it is important to remember that the vast majority of students are generally resilient and should recover quickly from an event like this. However, those with previous history of trauma, such as loss of a family member to death, parental divorce, being a victim of a crime or serious injury, being in an accident, poverty or homelessness, or having a real or vicarious exposure to violence (video games?) are more vulnerable and may have a stronger reaction and a longer recovery period for this event.

For those students who are having significant reactions to this event, we will have mental health support available throughout the district from counselors, social workers and psychologists. Our school nurses will also be ready to assist as needed for health concerns that may arise.

We will look to learn what we can from this latest school tragedy and use that information over the coming weeks to determine what improvements we can make in security and response procedures.

Please continue to keep the community of Newtown, and the students, teachers, staff and parents of Sandy Hook Elementary School in your thoughts and prayers. Thank you.

Les Fujitake
Superintendent of Schools
Vancouver Public Schools
Elementary school version

Dear (insert school name) families,

We are deeply saddened by the tragic news from Connecticut. As educators and as parents, it is
difficult to comprehend such catastrophic events. We feel closely connected to the children,
teachers and staff, families and community who were so devastated by this loss of innocent lives.

I want to reassure you that we take school safety and security very seriously at _________
Elementary School and in Vancouver Public Schools. We are vigilant and proactive when it
comes to our children's safety and have clear plans and procedures to deal with emergency
situations. Further, in response to recent events across the country, the school district is
increasing supervision and security at all sites. All elementary schools have at least two
administrators on-site, and Metro Watch is providing additional security for elementary schools.
These additional precautionary measures are in place until winter break.

We have convened as a staff to review other precautionary measures that will be implemented to
maintain both a secure and nurturing environment for our students. We have discussed what to
do and/or say if a student raises a concern or has questions about the tragedy. School support and
administrative staff have committed to being available and accessible to respond to children's
concerns and needs as necessary and appropriate.

I am sharing a link to an excellent document entitled, “A National Tragedy: Helping Children
Cope.” This document, prepared by the National Association of School Psychologists, provides
parents and school personnel with ideas and age appropriate responses to Friday's events.


Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “Sorrow makes us all children again. Destroys all differences. The
wisest know nothing.” I am sure that you, like me, are struggling to make sense of the tragedy in
Newtown. We also are trying to find words to help our children feel safe and resilient in a world
that sometimes feels unpredictable and scary. My only advice is to keep hugging your children,
tell them you love them, and let them know that you and the important people in their lives are
there to keep them safe.

As we enjoy this holiday season, I know that we will all have the families of Sandy Hook
Elementary School in our thoughts. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any
questions or if I can provide any support.

Wishing you all a peaceful and restful winter break,

____________, Principal
Dear Peel District School Board Families,

We were all shocked and saddened by the tragic events that transpired at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, on Friday. Our thoughts are with all those affected, and we acknowledge the bravery of staff, parents and community partners who reacted immediately to protect the children. Our flags will be lowered to half-mast, in an expression of support to the community of Newtown, until the end of the day on Dec. 21.

Although events like this are extremely rare, we recognize the impact they can have on each of us—our children, staff, families and friends. Individuals react to situations like this in various ways. We may feel sadness, grief, helplessness, anxiety and anger. Whatever you feel is okay.

Our social work team has prepared some tips to help you support your children and family at this time:

• Recognize that children may become concerned that something bad will happen to themselves, family or friends. Explain that safety measures are in place and reassure them that you and other adults will take care of them.
• If your child is not focused on the tragedy, do not dwell on it. Try to avoid having detailed adult conversations regarding the tragedy in front of children. However, be available to answer questions to the best of your ability. Young children may not be able to express themselves verbally. Pay attention to changes in their behaviour or social interactions.
• Limit exposure to media coverage. Images of a disaster or crisis can become overwhelming, especially if watched repetitively. Young children in particular may not be able to distinguish between images on television and their personal reality. Older children may choose to watch the news—be available to discuss what they see and to help put it into perspective.
• Maintain normal family routines as much as possible. Routine family activities, classes and friends can help children feel more secure.
• Be aware of your own needs. Don’t ignore your own feelings of anxiety, grief and anger. Talking to friends, family members, faith leaders and mental health counsellors can help. Let your children know you are sad. You will be better able to support them if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner.

As always, our top priority is the safety and well-being of each of our students—your children. This is a responsibility we take very seriously. It’s important for you to know help is available through our schools. If you are concerned about your teen or feel he or she needs additional support, and you would like to speak with a social worker or psychoeducational consultant, please contact your principal or vice-principal.

With the holiday season and winter break upon us, I hope you will have many opportunities to participate in and appreciate family life. There is no gift more precious than time spent with loved ones.

Sincerely,

Tony Pontes
Director of Education