A new Model School District Policy on Suicide Prevention, created by the Trevor Project in collaboration with ASCA, the National Association of School Psychologists and the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, helps school counselors and administrators introduce or improve suicide-prevention policies in their schools or districts.

BY NATHAN BELYEU
The final bell rings as hurried students with swinging book bags rush past closing lockers. Pausing in front of a classroom one young person sighs, “Here it is. Another hopeless day, and no one will even notice.”

For many youth in America, this is their reality – feeling isolated, ignored, unsupported and hopeless. As educators and school counselors, we understand that in the hurried education environments of today it’s becoming increasingly hard to offer personalized support to each young person who might be struggling. Still, we must pay attention. Even more importantly, we must take action.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, suicide is now the third leading cause of death among teens and young adults (ages 10-19), and alarmingly, for every young person who dies by suicide another 100-200 make a suicide attempt. This translates to an estimated count of three students in a typical high school who will attempt suicide each year. These kinds of numbers are frightening, and they also are tied to real stories and real risks faced by the students school counselors interact with each day. Fortunately, there are tools available to help your students thrive.

The Trevor Project provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) students, ages 13-24. This group of young people is considered high-risk for suicide attempts.

Created in collaboration with ASCA, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the National Association of School Psychologists, this policy tool contains model language, inclusive commentary, best practices and resources to help prevent suicide among all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

We knew while designing the policy tool that it needed to be useful to educators and also adaptable to existing policies or state laws. We were also tasked to make sure it would be easy-to-implement and help school leaders, school counselors and school psychologists address suicide prevention, risk assessment and intervention in and prevention of youth suicidal behavior. So, that’s what we did.

Schools can use this easily adaptable, modular policy to develop and implement comprehensive school district suicide-prevention policies. Its unique design can complement existing state laws requiring suicide prevention training for school staff or education for students. It can also be paired with current policies and programs that already support the emotional and behavioral well-being of young people.

By encouraging the adoption of this model policy, you can play a key role in advocating for and providing suicide-prevention education for school staff and students. Professional development that helps teachers and school counselors accurately understand suicide is key to keeping all students safe. Teachers and school counselors who have gone through professional development to recognize and respond to the warning signs of suicide increase the chances that a student in distress will be identified; this means these young people can be better recognized and connected to the life-affirming resources they need.

Although this policy is applicable to all students, it contains inclusive guidelines that help support some of the youth in our schools who are at higher risk for suicide, including, for example, LGBTQ youth, Native
According to the Centers for Disease Control, suicide is now the third leading cause of death among teens and young adults (ages 10-19), and alarmingly, for every young person who dies by suicide another 100-200 make a suicide attempt.

American youth and youth who have previously attempted suicide. It is important that professional development for educators include warning signs shown by these vulnerable populations.

**Suicide-Prevention Training**
Professional development regarding suicide prevention and intervention need not be paired with a districtwide policy. However, such a policy can create a framework for effectively implementing training and procedures. To help schools provide this key education, The Trevor Project offers workshops for both adults and youth that discuss the warning signs of suicide, how to appropriately respond to someone who needs support and what we can do to address the unique needs of LGBTQ youth.

**Trainings for school counselors:**
Trevor’s professional development options for educators and school counselors include Trevor CARE Training and Step In, Speak Up, an online interactive training.

Trevor CARE Training helps adults learn to “Connect, Accept, Respond and Empower” (CARE) with young people in crisis. This training discusses LGBTQ-specific risk factors for suicide, explores protective factors
For More Information

Model School District Policy for Suicide Prevention
www.trvr.org/modelpolicy

Suicide Prevention
Trevor CARE Training
www.trvr.org/care

Step In, Speak Up Training
www.trvr.org/stepin_speakup

Trevor Lifeguard Workshop
www.trvr.org/lifeguard

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
www.afsp.org

Ask for Help Campaign
www.trvr.org/askforhelp

Resources for LGBTQ Youth
Trevor Lifeline,
(866) 488-7386, a 24/7 crisis intervention and suicide prevention hotline

TrevorSpace.org, a social networking community of more than 80,000 LGBTQ youth from 143 countries around the world.

The stigma surrounding mental health and illness can often seem paralyzing for youth who already feel isolated, especially if they are LGBTQ and fear discrimination, harassment or rejection.

that can lower those risks and teaches attendees how to help youth get the support they need. This training is ideal for school counselors, health professionals, school staff and other educators and can be accessed in-person or online.

Step In, Speak Up is a 30-minute online training program through Kognito Interactive that helps school staff and faculty members understand the challenges LGBTQ youth in grades 6-12 face, giving them a chance to practice techniques for creating a safer and more supportive school environment. School counselors who complete the training will build skills to:

• recognize the needs and obstacles of high-risk student populations such as LGBTQ youth
• promote a safe space for all students with effective classroom management techniques

• initiate a conversation with students about sensitive topics, such as bullying
• know when and how to ask students if they are thinking about suicide

Throughout Step In, Speak Up, users assume the role of a teacher and engage in role-play conversation with fully animated, emotionally responsive virtual students. Both during and after each conversation, users receive personalized feedback based on the choices they made.

Experiencing trainings like Trevor CARE and Step In, Speak Up are invaluable when creating safe spaces for all students. Evaluations of suicide-prevention programs in middle schools and high schools found that comprehensive suicide prevention programs containing education – including teaching the warning signs of suicide, how students can respond to help a peer and screening for referral to mental health services – increases the identification of students who are thinking about suicide.

Workshops for youth: The Trevor Lifeguard Workshop is a suicide prevention education training for students in grades 6-12 that helps youth identify the challenges LGBTQ people face, recognize the warning signs of suicide and respond in a way that will keep them and their peers safe. This one-hour, interactive workshop is available to educators on DVD or through online streaming from The Trevor Project’s website. The Trevor Lifeguard Workshop is also the first suicide prevention training for LGBTQ youth to be listed in the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention/Suicide Prevention Resource Center’s Best Practice Registry.

Life-Affirming Programs
In addition to implementing potentially life-saving school policies and providing training for yourself, school staff and students, you can also participate in life-affirming campaigns that show students you are a safe person to talk to.

The stigma surrounding mental health and illness can often seem
paralyzing for youth who already feel isolated, especially if they are LGBTQ and fear discrimination, harassment or rejection. Trevor’s latest PSA campaign, “Ask for Help,” features first-person accounts of youth reaching out to friends, school counselors, teachers or parents for help, to promote the idea that it is brave to ask for help when you need it.

Students seek help from people they know and trust; as a school counselor, that person could be you. On the Trevor website, you can download print ads, posters, videos and more to display and share to show your students you are there if they need help.

When schools implement policies and programs designed to increase knowledge about suicide and increase support for at-risk students, the entire student body benefits. Many school counselors also serve as a club advisor to help support at-risk students such as LGBTQ youth. Some may decide to suggest or advise a gay-straight alliance or similar groups, which are shown to build connections and reduce the risk for suicide. Especially when supported by school counselors, these positive campaigns, clubs and groups create a school environment that help students succeed.

**Supporting All Youth**

School counselors play an invaluable part in making schools places where students’ mental health is supported and where youth are encouraged to grow into people who will change the world for the better. By advocating for these changes, you can protect all students at your school, reduce the risk factors for suicide and help put an end to these preventable tragedies.

No one wants the lonely student to feel as though nobody cares; no one wants youth to feel hopeless when we know they have so much potential. All students deserve to have a school that supports them and their desire to learn, grow and thrive. Together, we can reach these young people through targeted suicide-prevention policies, suicide-prevention trainings and life-affirming programs. When we make the choice to take action, we make the choice to save lives.

Nathan Belyeu is the education director at The Trevor Project in New York City. He is a national expert on LGBTQ youth and young adults, speaking with audiences across the country about LGBTQ competency, improving school climate and evidence-based approaches to bullying and suicide prevention. Contact him at nathan.belyeu@thetrevorproject.org for education training inquiries and other questions.