

**Category: Crisis Management**

**Background:** On the morning of Tuesday, September 6, 2022, during the second week of school, the district was alerted of a serious accident outside of our high schools. This was during student arrival. It was reported to the Administration Center that the person struck was transported with serious injuries and needed immediate surgery. Our crisis team assembled and assigned additional administrators to assist the school and go to the hospital. While managing this event, we learned that the individual was a paraprofessional being dropped off for her day at work and did not survive the surgery attempting to save her life.

The Allentown School District Office of Communication worked with district leadership, the City of Allentown, and the Allentown Police Department to determine what and when information could or could not be shared with a community experiencing loss. Our Crisis Team also worked to help our school community grieve and process this tragic event that happened during a busy time while many students and staff were outside.

**Communication Pieces:**

The first communication sent to families and staff was as brief as possible, followed by an internal update sent by our Deputy Superintendent on the afternoon of the 6th.

* **Internal and External - Sent to staff, families and posted to the school and district social media channels (8:45 AM):** *Please be aware that you may see police activity in the vicinity of Dieruff High School today. This is a result of a traffic incident that occurred earlier this morning. No additional details are available at this time and the Allentown Police Department will likely remain on campus during the school day. Thank you.*
* **Internal - To District Leaders/ Board of Directors from Deputy Superintendent Ramos (1 PM)**: *I am incredibly saddened to share this news. Dr. Roth, Mr. Siket, and I just left St. Luke’s hospital. Unfortunately, our Dieruff special education para, Ms. Angela Yowakim, who was hit by a car this morning, sustained catastrophic injuries. Her family is with her now and they will be removing her from life support momentarily.*

*Ms. Yowakim’s mom is also a food service employee at Allen High School.*

*Angela is a Dieruff high school graduate.*

*Staff and students at Dieruff are obviously taking this news very hard. We have the crisis team being deployed to Dieruff right now and for as long as necessary. If you have a district staff member or student impacted by this event, and need assistance, please let me know.*

*We are sharing this with you as your staff/students may be impacted, but we are asking that you do not forward this message or make announcements, as we want to give the family space and privacy. We know you will want support Dieruff and we will update you if Mr. Makhoul needs any additional support.*

By the evening of September 6, though the district/law enforcement did not release the name of the victim, social media posts paying tribute to Angela’s life started to appear and were sent to the media. We immediately began developing a letter to be sent to staff with the approval of the family.

* **Internal Update - Sent to school staff/ families (Wednesday Morning, 10 AM)** *- On the morning of Tuesday, September 6, a serious traffic accident involving a staff member occurred outside of Dieruff High School. This led to increased police and first responder presence throughout the day. We are saddened to report that this staff member has passed from injuries sustained during the accident. Ms. Angela Yowakim was a dedicated team member and a graduate of Dieruff HS.*

*We extend our deepest condolences to the family and friends of Angela. Out of respect for the family, we are not able to share any more information at this time. The family has also requested privacy and no home visitors. We also ask that those who may have photos or videos of the scene please refrain from posting them on social media due to the serious and graphic nature of the incident.*

*Our school crisis response team has enhanced support at Dieruff HS and we encourage staff, students, or families to please speak with a counselor or school psychologist.*

*We ask our families and students to always use caution and be aware of their surroundings while walking to and from school. The City is taking the lead in continuing to focus on educating motorists about pedestrian safety, as well as ramping up enforcement efforts and taking actions to improve infrastructure that results in safer streets.*

*Any families with questions or concerns may contact the Dieruff school office at 484-765-5500 or your child’s school counselor directly.*

**Press Conference:**

Unfortunately, this is not the first serious traffic incident, however, it is the first one in recent memory that resulted in the loss of life. Our new Mayor has prioritized resident safety and wanted to do more to help and address the situation. The district continued to work with the City to schedule and announce a press conference outside of the school the following day. The press conference was [broadcast live on the Allentown Police Department Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/allentownpolice/videos/652518059345682/).

The above message was sent to staff and families at the school prior to the press conference and mirrored the joint statement that was released in English, Spanish, and Arabic after the conclusion of the press conference. The joint statement was placed on our [district website](https://www.allentownsd.org/what_s_new/DHS9622), and newsletter, direct emailed to all staff and district families and shared on the school, district and City’s [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=387698683538386&set=pcb.387698736871714), Twitter, and [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/p/CiN09CnOHRx/).

**Other Outcomes**:

Our Operations and Facilities Department continued to work with the city in the following weeks to enforce new safety measures around the school. By mid-October the speed limit outside the school was lowered 25MPH (previously 30MPH), two new signs have been installed alerting drivers to the speed limit change, and the white paint on crosswalks has been refreshed.

The district and city continue to work together to share information related to pedestrian safety, bus safety, and the need to hire more crossing guards.

In the days following the event, the school received an outpouring of support. While our community continues to heal from this and other losses at the start of the year, the collaborative response between the district, city, and law enforcement presented a united front and focus on safety measures. A tragedy like this may never be prevented but how we respond in the future will be held to this standard in our community.

**Media Response:**

In this instance, it was determined that the principal of the school speak to the media, in lieu of someone from central administration. The principal had an existing relationship with the family and is also of Syrian descent and well-connected to our Syrian community here in Allentown. This story was covered heavily by our local media in the Lehigh Valley, as well as Philadelphia. All media requests were managed by myself and the building principal.

* Morning Call: [‘None of it makes sense’: Family, community try to cope with death of teacher’s aide hit by car outside Dieruff](https://www.mcall.com/news/local/mc-nws-angela-yowakim-profile-20220914-nr6pgwikyvbyxg2djgdn5dq4gi-story.html)
* WFMZ: [Brother of teacher's aide hit by car near Dieruff High School speaks out](https://www.wfmz.com/news/area/lehighvalley/brother-of-teachers-aide-hit-by-car-near-dieruff-high-school-speaks-out/article_5f23bc34-2f0f-11ed-8770-7b8f1e3bd8c5.html)
* WFMZ: [Allentown makes traffic changes near Dieruff HS after woman fatally struck by car](https://www.wfmz.com/news/area/lehighvalley/allentown-makes-traffic-changes-near-dieruff-hs-after-woman-fatally-struck-by-car/article_b562d324-4525-11ed-a1e9-6b5f4654e39e.html#comments)
* Lehigh Valley Live: [‘She loved Dieruff:’ Family, officials remember district employee killed in crash near school](https://www.lehighvalleylive.com/allentown/2022/09/she-loved-dieruff-family-officials-remember-district-employee-killed-in-crash-near-school.html)
* NBC 10: [Allentown Teacher's Aide Dies After Being Hit by Car Outside High School](https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/allentown-teachers-aide-dies-after-being-hit-by-car-outside-high-school/3356586/)
* 6ABC: [Allentown teacher's aide struck, killed in crosswalk in front of school](https://6abc.com/teachers-aide-killed-allentown-pennsylvania-crash-woman-hit-in-crosswalk/12209697/)
* Telemundo: [Asistente de maestra muere atropellada al cruzar hacia la escuela donde laboraba](https://www.telemundo62.com/noticias/local/maestra-muere-atropellada-al-cruzar-hacia-la-escuela-donde-laboraba/2246485/)