

Title: Preventing Suicide “Contagion” in High Schools

Presenter: Anna S. Mueller, PhD, MA, University of Chicago

- At the conclusion of this presentation, the participant should be able to (1) discuss what suicide contagion and suicide clusters are, (2) distinguish factors that encourage or deter contagion, and (3) identify issues that schools, communities, parents, and mental health workers must consider when managing a suicide death in a high school or a suicide problem in a community.

- Abstract: While suicide clusters are rare events, they are more common in adolescence and can be devastating for communities and schools. This presentation will review cutting-edge empirical research on suicide contagion and suicide clusters and will discuss strategies for building youth resiliency and avoiding contagion after a suicide. To do this, the presentation will draw on empirical evidence from both a large-scale longitudinal study of exposure to suicide in adolescence and an in-depth qualitative case study of a community with a significant and enduring problem with adolescent suicide clusters. Collectively, the evidence from these studies show that though youth’s vulnerability to suicide is heightened after exposure to suicide or a suicide attempt, this “contagion” is not passive. Instead, our evidence illustrates how exposure amplifies youth’s ability to see suicide as an option through the generation of inaccurate beliefs about suicide. This suggests several important directions for suicide postvention in schools which will be discussed. Though much past work has posited that suicide may be socially contagious, the studies reviewed in this presentation leverage unprecedented causal modeling strategies along with unique qualitative data that allow us to better understand the contagion process. Additionally, the presentation will illustrate why youth must be included as partners in suicide prevention and why listening to individuals with lived experience is necessary for robust prevention science. Audience members will be engaged through a dynamic power point presentation and a dedicated question and answer period. Ultimately, through the presentation of empirical evidence, after this presentation attendees will have a better understanding of (1) what suicide contagion and suicide clusters are, (2) what factors encourage or deter contagion, and (3) what issues schools, communities, parents, and mental health workers must consider when managing a suicide death in a high school or a suicide problem in a community.