



Introduction

The Language of Loss: Creating a Grief-Positive Culture is a powerful, arts-driven educational experience developed through The ECHO Initiative, bringing together experts in bereavement support, education, theater, music, and dance. Designed on the belief that grief must be experienced and understood, not just taught, this 90-minute assembly helps school communities build empathy, connection, and emotional awareness in a deeply human way.

With research showing that 1 in 13 children in New Jersey will experience the death of a parent or sibling before age 18 (Judi's House/JAG Institute, 2022), the reality is that many students are carrying invisible grief into classrooms every day. Without awareness and language, that grief often goes unrecognized, leaving young people feeling isolated at the very moments they most need support.

Through interactive theater, storytelling, music, and movement, **The Language of Loss** opens space for honest conversation and reflection. Centered on the theme "*Words Carry Weight*," it explores how language can harm or heal, and how empathy can transform the way we show up for one another in times of loss.

This is not a one-time presentation, but the beginning of an ongoing commitment. Schools are supported beyond the assembly with continued partnership and guidance, helping them weave grief-informed understanding into the fabric of their community in meaningful, lasting ways.

With gratitude,
The ECHO Initiative Team
(Empathy • Connection • Hope • Outreach)

"Through education and empathy, we build a kinder community"

Program Description

The Language of Loss: Creating a Grief-Positive Culture

The Language of Loss: Creating a Grief-Positive Culture is an innovative educational strategy developed through *The ECHO Initiative (Empathy, Connection, Hope, and Outreach)*, a group of community leaders in bereavement support, education, theater, music, and dance. The program was created to provide schools and communities with a more authentic, human-centered approach to grief education, one that moves beyond traditional presentations and creates meaningful opportunities for connection, reflection, and understanding.

Research shows that 1 in 13 children in New Jersey will experience the death of a parent or sibling by the time they reach 18 years of age (Judi's House/JAG Institute, 2022). Many more children and teens are grieving significant losses that may not be visible to teachers, school staff, or peers, often carrying their grief quietly while navigating the expectations of everyday school life. These realities highlight the growing need for grief-informed education and compassionate school cultures that recognize and respond to the emotional experiences students may be facing.

At the heart of the initiative is the belief that grief education should be experienced, not simply taught. Through an immersive 90-minute assembly experience, featuring interactive theater, music, movement, and storytelling, the program creates a safe and engaging environment where students and staff can better understand the emotional realities of grief and the impact language can have on someone navigating loss.

Centered around the theme “Words Carry Weight,” the program explores the contrast between language that unintentionally harms and language that fosters healing, empathy, and support. Through original theatrical vignettes layered with live music and dance, audiences experience realistic and emotionally resonant scenarios that reflect the lived experiences of grieving youth and the challenges they often encounter among peers, educators, and within their communities.

Rather than approaching grief as a clinical topic or scripted lesson, *The Language of Loss* encourages honest conversation, emotional awareness, and compassionate communication. The program is designed to help participants recognize how small interactions, comments, and assumptions can deeply affect someone who is grieving, while also empowering them with tools to respond with greater empathy, understanding, and confidence.

We also want to emphasize that this experience is intended to be the beginning of an ongoing conversation, not a one-time presentation. Our team remains available for follow-up support and continued partnership with schools that wish to further integrate these themes into their culture. We are committed to ensuring that no school is left to navigate this work alone, and that educators and leaders have access to meaningful guidance as they bring these ideas into practice in a way that feels sustainable and aligned with their community.

Key Program Elements

- **Interactive Theater Experiences**
Original performance-based vignettes that immerse audiences in real-life grief experiences and communication challenges.
- **Integration of Music and Dance**
Creative arts are woven throughout the program to deepen emotional connection and create a powerful shared experience.
- **Authentic Teen Perspectives**
Content shaped by the voices and lived experiences of grieving youth to ensure authenticity and relatability.
- **Student and Community Collaboration**
Partnerships with school districts, vocational programs and young artists to foster a “community of students” engaged in creating more compassionate school cultures.
- **Engagement for Both Students and Staff**
The program encourages meaningful dialogue among entire school communities, helping educators, administrators, and peers better support grieving individuals.

Through *The Language of Loss: Creating a Grief-Positive Culture*, ECHO seeks to create a lasting cultural shift in the way grief is acknowledged and supported, helping young people and adults alike develop the language, understanding, and compassion needed to truly show up for one another during life’s most difficult moments.

The ECHO Initiative Collaborators

- **Common Ground Grief Center**, under the leadership of Lynn Snyder, brings more than fifteen years of experience providing peer-based grief support to children, teens, young adults, and families navigating the death of a loved one. Through its ongoing support groups and extensive network of trained volunteers, Common Ground has developed a deep understanding of the emotional experiences, communication challenges, and unmet needs grieving youth often face within schools and communities. Their expertise ensures that *The Language of Loss* is grounded in authentic lived experiences and trauma-informed practices that prioritize emotional safety, connection, and healing. Common Ground’s contribution helps shape the initiative’s educational framework while ensuring the voices and realities of grieving young people remain at the center of the program.
- **Stephy’s Place**, led by Sheila Martello, contributes extensive experience in adult grief support, community outreach, and compassionate peer-based healing programs. Through years of creating safe spaces for individuals navigating loss, Sheila and Stephy’s Place have cultivated a strong understanding of the lifelong impact grief can have on emotional well-being, relationships, and community connection. Their involvement in *The Language of Loss* helps broaden the initiative’s perspective by emphasizing the importance of open dialogue, emotional vulnerability, and community-centered healing across all ages. Stephy’s Place brings a deeply human approach to grief education, reinforcing the initiative’s mission to create environments where grief can be acknowledged with empathy, connection, healing, and openness.

- **LEAD U**, through the leadership of Kelly Coulson-Perrini, JD Wilson, and Connor Effenberger, brings a dynamic and experienced team dedicated to youth development, educational engagement, and meaningful student-centered programming. Their combined backgrounds in leadership development, mentorship, and collaborative educational initiatives provide valuable insight into how schools can create environments that foster emotional awareness, empathy, and authentic connection among students. LEAD U's involvement in *The Language of Loss* helps ensure the initiative is engaging, accessible, and impactful for school communities while encouraging open dialogue surrounding grief and emotional wellness. Through their leadership and commitment to empowering young people, LEAD U plays an important role in helping transform grief education into an interactive and community-driven experience.
- **Jade Gordon** serves as a key creative force behind *The Language of Loss*, bringing both her educational expertise and theatrical background to the development of the program's original scripts and performance vignettes. As an educator and artist affiliated with the Spring Lake Theatre Company, she contributes a strong foundation in storytelling, stagecraft, and emotionally resonant performance design. Her work ensures that the theatrical elements of the initiative are both authentic and accessible, translating complex emotional experiences of grief into meaningful, age-appropriate narratives for students and staff. In addition to her creative leadership, Jade is also a team member with LEAD U, where she collaborates with fellow educators and youth development professionals to support engaging, student-centered programming. Her combined experience in education, theater, and youth engagement plays a vital role in shaping the artistic and emotional integrity of the project, helping ensure the program connects deeply with school communities.
- **Pamela Scarpa** brings over fifteen years of experience in school-based clinical counseling, prevention, and crisis response to *The Language of Loss*. As a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), she has worked extensively within educational settings supporting students through grief, trauma, and emotional distress, with a focus on early intervention and compassionate care. Her clinical expertise helps ensure the program is developmentally appropriate, psychologically grounded, and sensitive to the real-time needs of students and school communities. Through her involvement, Pamela strengthens the initiative's ability to translate complex emotional experiences into accessible learning moments while also guiding best practices for emotional safety and support within school environments. Her background in prevention and response work plays a critical role in helping shape how grief is understood, recognized, and addressed in ways that promote healing, stability, and connection.

For more information or to book an assembly, please contact Lynn Snyder at lynn@commongroundgriefcenter.org