RYAN'S STORY

Bullying & Suicide Prevention School Assembly

Presented by John Halligan

EDUCATOR LESSON PLAN

Pre-Assembly Preparation | Post-Assembly Follow-Up

Grade Levels	Grades 5–12
Assembly Length	Approximately 60 minutes
Program Type	Student assembly + optional parent evening presentation
Presenter	John Halligan, father of Ryan Patrick Halligan
Key Topics	Bullying prevention, cyberbullying, suicide prevention, digital citizenship, empathy, bystander intervention
SEL Alignment	CASEL core competencies | PBIS Tier 1 universal prevention
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About Ryan's Story

Ryan's Story is one of the most widely recognized bullying and suicide prevention school assembly programs in the United States. John Halligan — Ryan's father — presents the authentic account of his son Ryan Patrick Halligan, who died by suicide at age 13 following persistent bullying and cyberbullying.

Over more than 20 years, John has brought this program to 2,500+ schools and more than one million students nationwide. His advocacy led directly to Ryan's Law, Vermont's landmark bullying prevention legislation. He has appeared on Oprah, PBS, and ABC Primetime.

The program is not a lecture. It is a father sharing his family's story — and that authentic grief and love is what makes it resonate long after students leave the auditorium. Your role as an educator is to help students arrive ready to receive it and to guide them thoughtfully in the days that follow.

PART 1 — PRE-ASSEMBLY PREPARATION

Complete 1–2 days before the assembly

1.1 — Purpose of This Preparation

John Halligan's presentation is emotionally powerful. Students who arrive without context may feel blindsided, while students who arrive prepared are far more likely to engage constructively, seek help if they need it, and carry the message forward. Preparation is not about dulling the impact — it is about ensuring the impact lands safely and productively.

1.2 — Addressing Staff Hesitation

This is one of the most common concerns schools raise, and it deserves a direct answer: staff do not need to be therapists or crisis counselors to use these materials effectively. The lesson plan is specifically designed for educators without specialized mental health training.

The teacher's role is to facilitate, not to counsel. That means asking the discussion questions, holding space for students to respond, and knowing when to refer a student to the school counselor — all of which are skills teachers already use every day. The lesson plan provides the exact language to use, including how to open conversations, how to respond if a student discloses something serious, and when to step back and let trained staff take over.

Counselors and mental health staff handle the clinical side. Teachers handle the classroom side. The two roles are distinct, and the lesson plan is written with that distinction in mind.

For Administrators: If Staff Remain Hesitant
Schedule a brief pre-assembly meeting to walk through the materials together as a staff.
In schools that have done this, teachers consistently report feeling more prepared than they expected — and more grateful they participated.
Remind staff: the lesson plan tells them exactly what to say, when to refer, and when to step back. They are not on their own.

1.3 — Administrative Checklist

Before the Assembly Day
✓ Notify parents/guardians in advance — use the Letter Template Suggesting Parents Have A Follow-up Discussion About the Assembly (Documents for Schools page at ryanpatrickhalligan.org)
✓ Brief all teachers and counselors who will attend with students
✓ Identify students who may need additional support (e.g., recent loss, known trauma, current bullying situations)

✓ Ensure at least one school counselor or mental health staff member is present at the assembly
✓ Arrange a quiet space where students can step out if needed, with a trusted adult present
✓ Have crisis resources and the school's mental health contact information ready to distribute
✓ Confirm logistics with John Halligan's team: AV setup, podium/mic, timing, Q&A plan

Parent Notification Template

Use the **Letter Template Suggesting Parents Have A Follow-up Discussion About the Assembly** to notify families before the assembly. This template is available on the Documents for Schools page at **ryanpatrickhalligan.org**.

1.4 — Classroom Warm-Up Activity (45–60 Minutes Before Assembly)

Begin by having students watch the introduction video available at ryanpatrickhalligan.org. This short video gives students a first look at John Halligan and the story they are about to hear — helping them arrive at the assembly prepared rather than caught off guard. After watching, use one or both of the following activities to deepen reflection before students head to the auditorium.

Introduction Video
Show the introduction video from ryanpatrickhalligan.org before the assembly. https://www.ryanpatrickhalligan.org/introduction-video
After watching, allow 2–3 minutes of quiet reflection before moving to the activity below.
You do not need to facilitate a full discussion at this stage — the video is preparation, not the lesson.

Option A: Anonymous Reflection (15 min)

Ask students to write anonymously on an index card:

- Describe a time you witnessed someone being treated unkindly. What did you do? What do you wish you had done?

Collect the cards. Do not read them aloud. Tell students: "Today's assembly is for the person on that card — and for all of you."

Option B: Community Agreement (10 min)

Establish norms for how students will engage during and after the assembly. Ask the class to agree on three to five words that describe how they want to treat one another — for the rest of the day, and beyond. Write them on the board and leave them up.

Setting Expectations (5 min)

Tell students:

- "Today's speaker is a father who has lived through something very painful. He is sharing it because he cares about you."
- "You are allowed to feel whatever you feel. If you need a quiet break or support, tell a staff member so they can help you reach the designated support adult."
- "After the assembly, we will have time to talk. You do not have to process this alone."

1.5 — Safe Messaging Guidelines for Educators

The following guidance applies to how you and your staff discuss the assembly content before, during, and after.

Language to Use
"Ryan died by suicide" — use this phrasing, not "committed suicide"
"He was struggling, and he didn't feel like he had a way out"
"People who are hurting need connection, not judgment"
"If you're struggling, we want to know. You are not a burden."

Language to Avoid
Do not describe the method of Ryan's death in detail
Do not romanticize or dramatize his death
Do not use the phrase "committed suicide"
Do not suggest that bullying alone "caused" his death — mental health is complex
Do not dismiss students who seem upset as "overreacting"

PART 2 — POST-ASSEMBLY FOLLOW-UP

Same day and the week following the assembly

2.1 — Immediately After the Assembly (Same Day)

Do not rush students back to academic content. Allow 10–20 minutes for the class to decompress and process together before moving on.

Teacher: First 5 Minutes Back in the Classroom
Sit with students — don't stand at the front as if beginning a lesson
Open with silence for 30 seconds, then: "What are you feeling right now? You don't have to say it out loud."
Invite one or two students to share a single word that describes how they feel
Remind students who the designated support staff member is and where to find them. Students should ask staff for help reaching support.
Do not launch into discussion questions immediately — let emotion settle first

Identifying Students Who May Need Support

After returning to class, quietly check in with any student who:

- Left the auditorium during the assembly
- Appears withdrawn, tearful, or unusually agitated
- Makes comments about the assembly that reference personal experience with bullying
- Asks to leave class or seems unable to focus

For routine concerns, follow your school's counselor referral procedures and document the interaction.

If a student discloses current self-harm or suicidal thoughts, or you have an immediate safety concern, follow the school's crisis response protocol right away (see page 8). Contact designated support staff immediately and stay with the student until a supervised handoff.

2.2 — Discussion Questions by Grade Band

Choose 3–5 questions appropriate for your grade level. There are no wrong answers. Your role is to facilitate, not evaluate.

Middle School (Grades 5–8)

1	What part of Ryan's story stayed with you the most? Why do you think that part stood out?
2	Ryan experienced bullying both in person and online. How are those two kinds of bullying the same? How are they different?

3	Think about the bystanders in Ryan's story — people who saw what was happening. What could they have done differently?
4	What does it mean to be a real friend to someone who is struggling?
5	Has anyone ever shown kindness to you when you didn't expect it? How did that feel?
6	What is one thing you could do this week to make someone feel less alone?
7	If you were hurting the way Ryan was, who would you tell? What makes it hard to ask for help?

High School (Grades 9–12)

1	John Halligan said his son hid how much he was suffering. Why do you think students feel like they have to hide that pain?
2	Cyberbullying played a major role in Ryan's experience. What responsibility do we have for what we share, like, or repost online?
3	How does your school's culture around social status make it harder or easier for someone to ask for help?
4	What does "bystander" mean to you? Is there a difference between being a bystander and being complicit?
5	Ryan's Law came out of one family's tragedy. What would you want a law or policy to say about how schools handle bullying?
6	What does mental health support actually look like in your life — not in theory, but in practice?
7	If a friend told you they were thinking about hurting themselves, what would you do? What holds people back from acting?

2.3 — Classroom Activities (Days 2–5 Post-Assembly)

Activity 1: A Letter You Won't Send (30–40 min) — All Grades

Ask students to write a private letter — to Ryan, to John, to a bully they've encountered, to someone they've hurt, or to their younger selves. Students are not required to share. The act of writing is the practice.

Optional extension: Students who choose to may share one sentence from their letter with the class. Teacher models first.

Activity 2: Upstander Pledge (20 min) — Middle School

Students write and sign three personal commitments they will make as an upstander — someone who speaks up rather than stands by. Post them (with permission) in the classroom or hallway.

Examples to prompt thinking:

- "I will not laugh at mean comments, even when they're not about me."
- "I will tell a trusted adult if I know someone is being hurt."
- "I will reach out to someone who seems left out."

Activity 3: Digital Citizenship Audit (40 min) — High School

Students review their own social media behavior — not publicly, but privately — using a self-assessment checklist:

- Have I shared content that humiliated someone, even if it seemed funny?
- Have I stayed silent online when I knew someone was being targeted?
- Do I treat people online the way I would treat them face to face?

Debrief as a class: What norms should govern our online interactions with peers?

Activity 4: Ryan's Law — Civics Connection (45–60 min) — High School

John Halligan's advocacy led directly to Vermont's anti-bullying legislation. Have students research your state's bullying and cyberbullying laws, then evaluate: Is the law strong enough? What would they change?

Extension: Students draft a letter to a local school board member or state legislator with their recommendations.

2.4 — SEL & Curriculum Connections

Ryan's Story directly addresses CASEL's five core competency areas. Use the table below to connect post-assembly activities to your SEL curriculum.

CASEL Competency	How Ryan's Story Addresses It
Self-Awareness	Students explore their own emotions in response to Ryan's story; identify feelings of guilt, empathy, or complicity in bystander situations
Self-Management	Students practice regulating emotional responses during a difficult presentation; build awareness of emotional triggers
Social Awareness	Students develop perspective-taking — understanding how bullying feels from the inside, not just the outside
Relationship Skills	Upstander activities build assertiveness and the skills to support peers in distress
Responsible Decision-Making	Digital citizenship activities connect online choices to real-world consequences

PART 3 — CRISIS RESOURCES & EDUCATOR GUIDANCE

Print and keep this page accessible at all times

3.1 — Self-Harm, Suicidal Thoughts or Immediate Safety Concerns

Stay calm. Thank the student for telling you. Follow your school's crisis response protocol immediately. Contact designated support staff and stay with the student until a supervised handoff. Do not leave the student alone.

What to Say
"I'm really glad you told me. That took courage."
"You're not in trouble. I want to make sure you're safe."
"I'm going to get someone who can help us both right now."
"You matter to me and to this school."

What NOT to Say
Do not promise confidentiality — you are required to report
Do not leave the student alone
Do not minimize: "Everyone feels that way sometimes"
Do not interrogate: "Why would you do that?"

3.2 — National Crisis Resources

Share these with students in writing — not just verbally — in the days following the assembly.

Resource	Contact
988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline	Call or text 988 (24/7, free, confidential)
Crisis Text Line	Text HOME to 741741
StopBullying.gov	www.stopbullying.gov — resources for students, parents, educators
Ryan's Story Website	www.ryanpatrickhalligan.org — videos, resources, John's contact
SAMHSA National Helpline	1-800-662-4357 — mental health & substance use support

3.3 — Suggested School-Wide Follow-Up Actions

1. Send a summary email to all staff the day before the assembly, including this lesson plan and the crisis resource numbers
2. Identify the designated support staff member and staffed check-in location for the week following the assembly. Follow the crisis response protocol for immediate safety concerns.
3. Encourage teachers to do a brief daily check-in with students for 3–5 school days after the assembly
4. Share the Ryan's Story website with families in a follow-up communication
5. Send families the Letter Template Suggesting Parents Have A Follow-up Discussion About the Assembly — available on the Documents for Schools page at ryanpatrickhalligan.org
6. Document any student referrals or follow-up conversations in your school's support system

About This Program

This program exists because Ryan's story matters — and because the students in your school matter. John asks only one thing of the schools he visits: use it. Use the conversations, the questions, and the connections this assembly makes possible. The work doesn't end when the assembly does.

John Halligan | ryanpatrickhalligan.org

Questions or follow-up? Contact John Halligan directly.

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