



# Safety management

reduces risk when taking students out of the classroom



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Any teacher who has ever had the responsibility of planning and implementing a school excursion, school camp, curriculum-based field study, social outing etc for students understands how time-consuming the planning process can be and how much responsibility is involved. Increasingly, taking students out of the classroom - particularly into the outdoors - is getting harder with increasing amounts of administration in regards to verifying adherence to departmental or school procedures.

At the same time, the top schools and teachers across the country are aware that education out of the classroom is a highly valuable teaching and learning vehicle that is integral to quality curriculum delivery. They understand that it is essential that today's students - who are increasingly sophisticated learners, encouraged to think critically and have a deep understanding of the world around them - spend quality time out of the classroom whenever appropriate.

So, just as the school gate needs to be left wide open it is increasingly being closed...

Of course the intention of policy within the school system (both public and private) is to reduce risk. However, a focus on risk management procedure takes the limelight away from another very important strategy (some would say the most important) when taking students out of school grounds, that is, safety management.

I'd like to suggest that the most fundamental change that can be implemented by schools and other educational organisations to improve risk management and to make it easier and safer to take students out of the classroom is to ensure they pay more diligence to safety management; that the people in positions of responsibility consider safety management principles on equal par with risk management principles.

At present we're losing sight of safety management as a strategy because of our focus on risk management. (A great example of the current obsession

on risk management can be found in Standards Australia's *Guidelines for Managing Risk in Sport and Recreational Organisations* which provides 22 definitions relating to risk management and not one definition relating to safety or safety management).

It is essential that we value safety management more than we do. Across all areas of the education field including policies, procedures and resources, safety management systems deserve a higher standing. In turn, we'll have less chance of losing perspective in regards to risk management.

So what is safety management and how does it differ from risk management?

According to the Macquarie Dictionary, safety is "the state of being safe: freedom from injury or danger," whilst to manage is, "to handle, direct, govern or control in action or use." These two simple definitions provide the cornerstones for safety management because they explain the objective i.e. safety and the process (to manage).

Importantly, when a greater weighting is placed on safety management it changes the focus from the prescriptive administration of risk toward performance-based undertaking of safety.

On a practical level, a heightened status of safety management within schools and educational organisations will reduce the number (and possibly severity) of accidents and incidents. As a result the current over-administration of risk would reduce to acceptable levels, importantly with no increase in actual risk.

Examples of safety management strategies that schools and other educational institutions may wish to consider include:

Ensuring that school executives, principals and board members (ie, those responsible for appointing staff in charge of organising and coordinating school camps, excursions and sporting events etc) understand and accept their responsibility with regards to safety management and ensure that any teachers given the organising/ coordinating role are equipped with the following tools:

- › the appropriate time to research and organise excursions and camps
- › the necessary qualifications and knowledge to follow the prescribed process
- › a deep understanding of both risk and safety management principles (and are prepared to stand up for them)
- › first-class administration skills
- › the experience and confidence to critic the pre-trip information received, be that from the school itself, parents or external organisation



Presently, with a risk management focus, the vast majority of teachers researching and planning for students to leave the classroom request only two documents from potential providers, that is, their “risk management documentation” and public liability insurance. A school with a safety management approach would have a member or members of staff capable of discerning good risk management

documentation over poor and the ability to investigate whether the theory holds up in practice.

This member or members of staff should also be able to enter into dialogue about safety with a provider, asking about the company’s safety track record - how many first aid incidents there have been in the past twelve months; how many of these have required further medical assistance etc. (A provider’s response to this request is also the ideal way to find out how that company values safety and risk management).

A second example of good safety management from school executives, principals and members of the board pertains to how much they value the experience being undertaken and how much they are willing to pay for safety. (Good safety generally costs a little bit more). This does not mean the higher-priced option is expensive. What it should represent is value for money - correct safety measures = quality risk management = value for money.

A third example of good safety management is evident when an organisation considers the time of year they choose to participate in activity outside the school grounds. Important questions need to be asked in regards to weather conditions. Will it be too hot? Will participants more likely suffer from sun exposure? Is it bushfire season? How will the cold affect students? How can they be prepared for such conditions? etc.

The time of year can also impact on an external provider’s ability to manage business safely. For example, every organisation has a maximum operating capacity. During Terms 1 and 4, traditionally the busiest times for education out of school grounds, schools need to ensure that providers do not exceed capacity by automatically accepting additional bookings and thinking about safety later. (Obviously timing can be problematic with a school’s calendar but good safety management suggests that a school and a provider should work together to identify a mutually agreeable and safe time for any activity to take place).

In essence, good safety management should permeate throughout an organisation. I recommend that safety management does not replace risk management, rather, that more diligence regarding safety management will result in less need for risk management. ■

**Article provided by Antony Butcher. Antony, along with Fleur Harmelin, is the founding director of Land’s Edge NSW. [www.landsedge.com.au](http://www.landsedge.com.au)**

## Recommended Reading

Adventure Activities Standards  
[www.orc.org.au](http://www.orc.org.au)

Brookes, A. (2003). Outdoor education fatalities in Australia 1960-2002. Part 1. Summary of incidents and introduction to fatality analysis. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, 7 (1), 22-35.

Brookes, A. (2003). Outdoor education fatalities in Australia 1960-2002. Part 2. Contributing circumstances: supervision, first aid, and rescue. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, 7 (2), 34-42.

Brookes, A. (2003). Outdoor education fatalities in Australia 1960-2002. Part 3. Environmental circumstances. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, 8 (1), 44-56.

Dumble, R. (2002) *When is a qualification not sufficient? When a law court judge says so!* [www.orc.org.au/ResearchProjects/Rsch\\_qualification.html](http://www.orc.org.au/ResearchProjects/Rsch_qualification.html)