

CHAPTER
15

**EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN EMERGENCY
MANAGEMENT IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS**

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Abstract: In Australia, national and state bodies are responsible for emergency management. This paper describes a workshop on "Emergency Management in Schools" conducted by Emergency Management Australia to identify how this federal body can best provide educational support and resources, especially those related to education and training, to state schools and other agencies. A number of national issues and strategies emerged from the workshop, including the use of a comprehensive approach to emergency management, professional development, curriculum programmes, planning, and communication and dissemination.

Background

In Australia, schools are one of the safest places in the community for children and young people. School jurisdictions are working hard to provide a safe and supportive school environment. The recent publication of the "National Schools Framework" provides Australian school sectors with strategies that can inform practice, thus enhancing students' physical, social and emotional well-being. The framework also contains a set of guiding principles and related key elements and approaches on how schools can provide a safe and supportive learning environment.

In the Australian Constitution, the eight state and territory governments have primary responsibility for protecting life and property in Australia. Thus, each state and territory has its own police, fire, ambulance and emergency service agencies. Similarly, states and territories each have responsibility for schooling their citizens. The federal government is committed to assisting states and territories to develop their emergency management and educational capacities.

Emergency Management Australia (EMA) is responsible for federal emergency management. It conducts education and training activities at the Emergency Management Australia Institute at Mt. Macedon, Victoria. Part of EMA's role is to train emergency managers and provide a forum for exchanging ideas on best practice in emergency management, including finding ways to mitigate incidents and disasters through education and preparation.

It is EMA's firm belief that schools are key focus centres for communities and that any incident impacting on school also impacts on the wider community. Schools tend to be a focus as gathering points and shelters for the community in the event of a disaster.

"Emergency Management in Schools" workshop

In September 2003, EMA convened an "Emergency Management in Schools" workshop. The workshop provided a forum for consultation and information-sharing for school principals and emergency managers from all states and territories on emergency management support and resources available to schools across the country. Its purpose was to identify how EMA could provide further assistance to schools as part of their emergency management obligations. More specifically, the aims of the workshop were to:

- Share examples of good practice with participating agencies.
- Consider the current and possible future applications of risk management as a tool for improved emergency management in schools.
- Obtain feedback on the EMA publication *Emergency/Disaster Planning for Principals*.
- Examine other ways in which federal and state governments can contribute to improving emergency management in schools.

Some of the issues and outcomes of this workshop are presented below.

Common threads

Although each state and territory in Australia has developed different emergency management systems, there are a number of common national issues and strategies.

Comprehensive emergency management

How is *emergency management* defined in Australian communities? Emergency management is not emergency services (*i.e.* uniformed police, fire-fighters, emergency service personnel), nor is it managing emergencies and responding to crises.

A comprehensive approach to emergency management comprises four phases: *preparation, prevention, response and recovery*. It encompasses a range of measures to manage risks in communities and the environment. Emergency management involves establishing and implementing plans and structures, and co-ordinating the work of government and voluntary and private agencies to better deal with the whole spectrum of emergency needs. Emergency management is the responsibility of all: governments, communities, emergency services and schools. Australian school communities recognise that emergency management in schools is not a specialised subject area; it must be integrated into the mainstream curriculum and education policy. This is reflected in many schools, where a whole-school approach is used to promote the learning, health and well-being of all students and staff through established policies, programmes, practices and partnerships, and where emergency management programmes are perceived as an important part of the fabric of the school community.

The role of emergency managers is to carry out any tasks before, during or after a disaster or emergency that provide for the community's safety from natural, man-made or technological disasters. By definition, emergency managers include police, fire-fighters and State Emergency Service personnel, doctors, shire engineers, teachers, social workers, public health employees and land use planners.

Risk management

Adopting emergency risk management as a tool has helped communities and emergency managers move away from a hazard-based view of disasters. It has also significantly changed the perception of emergency management by all sectors of the Australian

community, including the school community. All schools have organised training programmes for staff to apply the risk management approach; education and training plays an essential role in preparing for all possible contingencies.

Responsibilities

All states and territories have a directorate within the state government Department of Education that is responsible for overseeing, co-ordinating and assuring the quality of emergency management in schools. Each directorate is structured differently. In the state of New South Wales, for example, the Safety and Security Directorate has three units, which are responsible for delivering a range of programmes to school communities throughout New South Wales: the School Response Unit, the Discipline and Attendance Unit and the School Security Unit.

Professional development

Most states run workshops on effective emergency management in their schools for newly appointed principals. Emergency management directorate officials also attend principals' conferences to advise on developments, policies and support mechanisms available to principals. In some states, scenario-based training using agency simulators and equipment is provided to principals, staff and departmental officials by local emergency service agencies. In many cases, full days are spent solving problems and managing critical incidents.

Curriculum programmes

The Crime Prevention Workshop Programme is a good example of an effective curriculum programme. It was delivered by police officers and teachers to students in New South Wales schools, and addressed issues such as responsible use of local public space, theft, and drug and alcohol use. The programme was recently evaluated by an independent agency. The assessment indicated that prior to the workshop, students were ambivalent about involving themselves in offending behaviour. After the workshop, about 70% of surveyed students reported that they would not involve themselves in that type of behaviour even if pressured by peers.

Incorporating disaster studies in compulsory curriculum, such as mathematics and social studies, increases the awareness of students and teachers about the contexts in which such events can occur in their school or neighbourhood. The EMA Web site (www.ema.gov.au) provides a number of links to relevant curriculum material.

Collaboration

Many school programmes have involved the collaboration of students, staff, parents, families, emergency service employees and the wider community. Such an approach is effective in creating a sense of connectedness and belonging that is vital to successfully mitigate emergencies. In all states, a number of strategies are used to facilitate this consultative approach, from including students in emergency planning committees, to organising regular meetings between senior state police, fire fighters, emergency service officers, principals and departmental officers.

Most schools and departmental officials establish formal links with emergency service agencies. Activities such as Fire Truck Day, bushfire preparation and Emergency Service Cadet programmes are frequently organised for schools. Departmental officials often give and receive advice regarding programmes and activities.

Planning

As with all emergency management activities, the planning process is as important as the final plan. Executing the plan – which does not mean simply fire drill evacuation practice – further reinforces the process. Many schools have moved past the traditional natural hazard-based planning and practice used for fires, storms and earthquakes by recognising the need to plan and practice for a range of emergency scenarios, even small events. Regular training provides effective practice for an event, and ensures that all parties become familiar with the procedures and the environment in which emergency events may occur. Training can also provide a sense of comfort and support to students.

Culture

Australia is a multi-cultural nation. Australian emergency management programmes for schools consider the cultural environment in which the country, region and community lives and works. Thus, programmes are structured to identify and respond to local community needs and priorities and to environmental and cultural values. In Australian society, children are generally not exposed to such traumatic events as drive-by shootings. Yet, security guards are often employed in some Jewish and Muslim schools. For some immigrants, any authority figure in uniform can evoke negative memories and responses. These must be taken into account in programmes.

Communication and dissemination

Communication and dissemination are central to successfully implementing safety programmes in Australian schools. Many schools' emergency management plans are available on the school's Web site and intranet; some schools use emergency management information as screen savers and wallpaper.

Regular meetings are organised with all stakeholders to ensure that information is shared and decisions are transparent. Bulletin board notices, home newsletters and announcements at school assemblies are all traditional but effective means of communicating safety-related messages to the school and community. Again, the involvement of emergency service personnel in this process ensures the credibility and engagement of all parties. Regular newsletters and information bulletins are shared between schools, departmental authorities and emergency service agencies.

Conclusion

This paper outlined some of the programmes undertaken in Australian schools to enhance their emergency management capability. Emergency management involves the *entire* school community. Thus, different programmes have been developed to serve the wide range of schools and communities in different areas of Australia. While strong co-

ordination arrangements are in place in each state and territory, significant variation exists between individual schools and regions. Recent measures taken to co-ordinate these different approaches bodes well for future work towards the ultimate objective: providing a safe environment for our children.