

## Risk Management Seminar

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### Introduction

The 2007 Risk Management Seminar Series seeks to engage with school leaders to share the knowledge and understanding that the Victorian Outdoor Education Association has developed over the last two years; although it is grounded on the professional knowledge of the association gathered over 25 years.

As Executive Officer of the VOA I have been fortunate the Chair the Review Panel that has undertaken the review of the Department of Education's *Safety Guidelines*. Prior to that I was an outdoor education teacher for more than a decade working with government schools and independent schools. I also ran a small business for two years and sat on the governing Board of three independent schools in Brisbane.

This Seminar will provide an introduction to the soon to-be-released Department of Education's *Safety Guidelines for Education Outdoors* and an insight into how they have been developed and how you as leaders in your school can support the planning and decision making process with the guidance of these new materials.

I'd like to begin by dealing with the VOA's perspective on risk and education because in many respects our philosophical approach to risk management was foundational to the work that followed.

### Risk and education

Risk is often perceived negatively. And yet life spent avoiding risk is in many ways a life lived in either fear or denial. As Sting says, "*A lot of people approach risk as if it's the enemy when it's really fortune's accomplice.*"

So in approaching the issue of managing risk in outdoor and adventure activities in an educational context we need first to recognise that risk is not only about loss or the possibility of harm, but it is also about growth, change and learning.

The VOA understands risk as, "*human interaction with uncertainty*". Which is affirmed by the Australian Standard which explains risk as "*exposure to the consequences of uncertainty*".

As we look more closely at developing guidelines and their application in each context we are particularly interested in eliminating or minimising the chances of harm to students or staff.

This understanding then suggests that we accept that risk in its broad form is a part of the educational experience, and that action is required if we are to manage those risks to ensure that learn can occur in an environment where the risks are understood, controlled and communicated.

So my first questions to you to reflect on are:

*“What is your school’s perspective on risk and education?”*

*“What risks do your parents accept as part of the educational experience?”*

### **Strategic risk oversight**

I don’t know about you but when I learnt to drive I was taught by my father.

Almost 17 years ago he strapped himself in beside me and did more than teach me to drive – he began to teach me how to manage risk. Something he started on the deck of a sail boat many years before.

One session during my learner driving particularly sticks in my mind. It was my first night drive and we were driving dad’s work car – an even bigger responsibility.

I edged out of the driveway and turned up the street my eyes adjusting to the new experience.

When we drove in those days while I learnt dad didn’t talk much about driving; he’d already done the hard work by setting an example for the past two decades. But this particular night he had something simple and powerful to tell me.

I turned down Laurel Avenue and he asked me, *“Where are your eyes?”*

I was a bit confused. *“What do you mean?”*

*“Where are your eyes looking?”* he said.

*“Down the street”,* I replied.

*“No they’re, not. They’re one the lights in front of the car.”*

He was right. I was staring a few feet in front of the car intent on ‘seeing’ everything, and of course seeing only a small portion of what was important.

*“Look beyond the headlights,”* he said. *“That’s where the danger is.”*

As leaders in our schools I want to encourage you in the work you do as risk managers to “look beyond the headlights”.

The teachers and instructors leading your students in the field will be dealing with the operational risk management issues right in front of them. Ensuring students are wearing helmets when they ride or climb, managing group behaviour, maintaining close supervision during a ropes course session. Constantly employing their professional judgement.

School leaders – principals, school councils, heads of departments – in my view need to be engaged in strategic risk oversight.

This might sound like a collection of weasel words, but essentially it means looking beyond the headlights. It’s about dealing with the many issues that will come together to create risks in our programs. It’s about clearing the road ahead so your staff can drive safely.

And it is the planning process that is at the heart of this responsibility. The new Department of Education’s *Safety Guidelines for Education Outdoors* have been developed to support and inform this process.

### ***Safety Guidelines for Education Outdoors - context of the review***

The process of reviewing of what were then called the DE&T Guidelines for Safety in Outdoor and Adventure Activities began in 2004. After the VOA Council had appointed me as Executive Officer in late 2003 they directed me to engage the Department to find out where the review of the Safety Guidelines was up to. The Department responded positively and appointed a policy officer to liaise with the VOA about the issue and by early 2005 had contracted the VOA to undertake a review of the Safety Guidelines.

Of particular relevance was the Department’s request that the materials be developed for publication online.

While liaising with the Department it was established that:

- The DE&T Guidelines for Outdoor and Adventure Activities were first published in 1972 in a small booklet.
- The booklet was further reviewed in the early 1980’s and what has become known as the ‘blue book’ was published in 1982.
- In 1988 a Ministerial Review of Outdoor Education Activities was published including recommendations relevant to the Safety Guidelines.
- The activities covered by the Safety Guidelines series are:
  - Base Camping
  - Ropes Course

- Bushwalking
- Canoeing
- Snow Activities
- Orienteering
- Cycling
- Horseriding
- Rock Climbing
- Abseiling
- Swimming (other than school swimming programs)
- Surfing
- Water skiing
- Windsurfing
- Snorkelling
- Scuba Diving

More broadly the project got underway in a context of increased regulation and greater expectations for risk management documentation:

- Section 23 of the Occupational Health & Safety Act of 2004 - “Duties of employers to other persons”. This section states:

“An employer must ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that persons other than employees of the employer are not exposed to risks to their health or safety arising from the conduct of the under taking of the employer.”

- Publication of the Adventure Activity Standards by the Outdoor Recreation Centre Inc – a set of minimum standards developed by sections of the outdoor recreation industry.

Finally, there is also in my view an evolving relationship between parents and schools which sees the school as a service provider. This can result in a culture that sees any harm or injury – whether it is physical, emotional or intellectual – as requiring redress or the apportioning of blame. This has a direct influence on the risks we are willing to accept.

This community context sets the scene for a new approach to the application of safety guidelines in schools.

### ***Safety Guidelines for Education Outdoors – process of the review.***

In undertaking this project the VOA Council established a Review Panel to inform and direct the review process. In determining membership of the Panel the Council used the following criteria:

- a background in, or sound knowledge of, government schools in Victoria
- experience leading a variety of adventure activities with school students
- knowledge and application of DE&T Safety Guidelines with school students
- experience developing safety and risk management plans

- knowledge of the research into safety management and fatality prevention
- critical thinking skills
- evidence of engagement with the Outdoor Education profession

Panel members selected on the basis of this criteria were:

- Clare Dallat
- Mark Dingle
- Steve McMurtrie
- Hayne Meredith
- Margaret Nikolajuk

It has been a privilege to work with these professionals along with many other individuals and organisations to provide the Department with our recommendations.

One of the Panel's first tasks was to establish the purpose of the Safety Guidelines. What did they exist to do. The panel established that their purpose was to:

- support teachers in the planning and preparation of adventure activities, and,
- support principals and school councillors to make informed decisions during the approval process.

The Panel then developed a set of principles which we sought to employ in the development of the materials. Our intention was that the guidelines:

- are not in place to provide a training manual on how to run an activity
- should use concrete and unambiguous language which does not require layers of interpretation
- should encourage *conscious* decision making by those planning activities not simply provide a checklist which does not require active thinking on the part of teachers
- should not be so lengthy as to deter people from using them

With this as the backdrop to the work of the Panel we can now explore the way in which the website can support you as school leaders to undertake your decision making role.

See the presentation slides for more information.

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<sup>i</sup> Cline, P.B. (2004) [Risk and Adolescence](#). Brathay European Youth Seminar, Ambleside, England. September 15-19 (in press)

<sup>ii</sup> Risk Management AS/NZS 4360:2004