

Risk Management in Schools

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The world today is characterised by increasing turbulence--turbulence that tends to generate risks that were unknown a few decades ago. Violence, drug abuse, drug trafficking, teacher bashing, sexual molestation, promiscuity, accidents, kidnapping, vandalism, and chemical hazards are all common features of modern school life. School administrators, therefore, must educate themselves about strategies and preventive programmes that will assist them to insulate their schools from the effects of these modern-day plagues. They must also strive to produce productive, cooperative, caring, and nationalistic citizens. To effectively realise these goals, they must embrace the concept of risk management, which has been appropriated from the corporate world.

Risk management has been used successfully by effective corporate decision makers. In education, it is proving to be a useful platform upon which to build strategies for school safety and security.

There are several popular definitions of risk management. The ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) Digest No. 86, of February 1994, defines risk management as "a coordinated effort to protect an organization's human, physical, and financial assets. Brown, a writer on risk management, writing in 1999, submits that it is the "systematic application of management policies, standards and procedures to the tasks of identifying, analysing, assessing, treating and monitoring risks to minimize the exposure to physical, mental, social or financial harm of loss to the clients, staff and the organization." Two other researchers, Forlin & Birch, define it as the integration of policy alternatives and selecting the most appropriate response to risk in the light of administrative, legal, and organisational requirements."

For us in Trinidad and Tobago, these concerns can be translated into a desire to create in our schools zones free of weapons, drugs, bullying behaviour; and chemicals present in carpeting, indoor wood products, vinyl, floors, toilet bowl cleaners, graffiti removers, and weed killers. With respect to the threat posed by chemicals, modern research is now arguing that, to a great extent, the school, teachers, and parents are often held solely accountable for the poor performance of children at school, when, in fact, blame should also be shared by environmental conditions at the school. The literature suggests that environmental improvements could have positive results for individual students and the school as a whole. Some of the results identified include a possible decline in absenteeism by both teachers and students, an improvement in students' levels of concentration, and an increase in quality instruction time.

Recently, there has been much debate and discussion about the issue of student safety and security in schools. The President of TTUTA has been prominent among those who have voiced fears about security at schools and the possibility of kidnappings taking place on school compounds. I believe that the time has come to seriously promote the concept of risk management in our schools. The literature insists that an effective risk management

programme can only be realised if an effective management information system (MIS) is developed and put in place. Schools, therefore, need to be equipped with the tools and expertise required to collect accurate data on a regular basis, and to process this data for use by school administrators. The administrators will then be able to review, plan, and implement effective risk management programmes in their respective schools.

Australia has been able to achieve some measure of success in this area, and has implemented legislation that mandates all employers to provide safe workplaces, inclusive of plant and equipment, transport, and storage. It also has stipulated that all employees assist the employer in the maintenance of healthy and safe working environments. The intent is that every worker should enjoy healthy and safe working conditions.

School administrators (supported by relevant legislation) have an obligation to provide a working environment that is safe and healthy for staff, students and other users of school facilities. This is best achieved by developing, communicating, maintaining, and monitoring a risk management programme, as well as articulating a policy statement on risk management. Through these, administrators can identify the system to be adopted, the objectives of the risk management programme, the procedures for carrying it out, the internal standards set, and the monitoring and auditing procedures to be applied.

No one can deny that all children need a safe environment in which to learn and achieve, and teachers also need a safe environment in which to work. Indeed, a safe, pleasant, and supportive working environment remains an essential aspect of teachers' working conditions. The "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001 (NCLB) in the USA endorses this view. In fact, it demands that schools should implement policies that give students the choice to attend a safe public school if they either attend a persistently dangerous public elementary or secondary school, or become victims of violent crime while in or on the grounds of a public school.

The NCLB seeks to promote safe and orderly schools by implementing programmes that protect students and teachers, encourage discipline and personal responsibility, and combat illegal drugs. The strategies employed in this reform effort may be worthy of consideration by our educational planners.

Risk management also offers to schools a number of useful technological solutions to security and crime problems. Schools can now select categories of technology when faced with the problems of unwelcome intruders and armed individuals. These include keys and smart cards, metal detectors, alarm systems, and surveillance equipment. However, schools have been advised to exercise great care with respect to the application of such technologies, since they may carry the following unintended consequences—reinforcement of fear, undermining of the social ecology of the school, and the generation of considerable expense, since these technologies require regular maintenance, repairs, and upgrades

Clearly, the Ministry of Education and our school administrators have a herculean task on their hands. Risk management is new to our school culture and, as a result, it will require time, appropriate intervention strategies, the determination of all stakeholders to assist in promoting it, and persistence before it can take root. However, there does not appear to be much choice if our schools are to deal effectively with the problems confronting them, and achieve acceptable standards of discipline. The Ministry of Education should also seek to introduce effective risk management programmes in its offices.

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