

School Excursions: How Safe?

School excursions are often a fun filled, learning experience for students - it gives them an opportunity to learn and experience outside of the classroom and text books.

Some excursions are relatively tame – a trip to the museum or Questacon, whereas others are a bit more action packed like skiing at Thredbo or panning for gold in Victoria, and, yet, others extend beyond our shore line to places like France, Germany or New Zealand. Parents generally feel comfortable about sending their offspring on these adventures, after all it is part of the school experience - but what happens if something goes wrong?

As in life, there can be an unpredictability about excursions. In the ACT, some students have been in life threatening situations, particularly whilst on overseas excursions. In the United Kingdom an 11 year old school girl lost her life during a skiing trip to France; in 1996 a boy was doomed to a life in a wheelchair after ignoring his teacher and went skiing off-piste whilst on excursion in Austria. Another story tells of a girl who lost her virginity to her boyfriend whilst on an excursion, unfortunately, the media got hold of the story and it ended up becoming a scandal. The list goes on with excursion horror stories but, if put into perspective, they are relatively rare.

"The parent culture in the ACT, by and large, has confidence in its teachers," said Mr Bob Nield, Principal of Campbell High School.

Before an excursion can take place, the ACT Department of Education scrupulously ensures that everything is in order. After a stringent check list has been approved, it is passed on to the Executive Director, who then has the final say as to whether the excursion can go ahead.

"If a school wants to go on an overnight, interstate excursion the school has to fill out a series of forms. We check the teacher/student ratio, make sure the forms are properly filled out and that everything is in order. If it is an overseas excursion, it becomes more complex. There is a very stringent set of parameters in place in order to have an overseas excursion ticked off by the Department. The Department has to be notified a few months beforehand with the school's intention, we then give them an approval in principle. We are very strict with overseas excursions and I must feel extremely confident that everything is in order before I pass it on to the Chief Executive to sign," said Ms Narelle Hargreaves, Director of the Schools Directorate and International Education.

Although safety and care is of primary importance, there is also the issue of the of parents being able to afford an excursion.

"Financial concerns, as well as safety concerns, weigh heavily on parents. Parents are often under enormous pressure from their child, who is also under pressure from their peer group, to go on an excursion – parents get swept along in their child's enthusiasm and find it difficult to say "no"," said Mr Nield.

"Campbell High School recently had a very successful excursion, in conjunction with Gold Creek School and Melba High, to Central Australia. Parents often find it more financially feasible to send their child on a group discount excursion than a family trip,"

he said.

The question that needs to be raised though, is: Who is responsible if something does go wrong? Government guidelines for excursions are extensive and comprehensive but, obviously not conclusive. Should a parent sue/blame if everything possible was done to try and avert a situation?

In the ACT, if a Yr 6 group went on an overnight excursion to Jindabyne, a minimum of one adult per 20 students would be required (minimum of two adults per excursion). Half the attending adults would have to be teachers. What if two students sneak out at 3.00am and one breaks their leg during their early morning stealth? Who is responsible? The following information may assist in clarifying the situation.

Medical Emergency

Will I be notified before any medical procedures are conducted, in the event of a medical emergency?

A procedure must be followed where medical attention is obviously necessary and a parent is not available. The teacher in charge should send for an ambulance or doctor or arrange transport to the nearest medical facility. The choices stipulated by the parent on the medical information form should be respected where possible. Parents must be advised as soon as practicable of action taken in an emergency.

Consent Forms

If I sign the excursion consent form, does that mean the teachers on the excursion will not be liable for any thing that happens?

While the use of a consent form does not absolve schools and teachers from liability as a result of an act of negligence, it is evidence of care and parent awareness to have forms completed, returned to the school and retained on file.

In the event of an accident, the forms are forwarded to the Industrial & Legal Section.

Insurance

Will I be able to sue the department if I am charged medical costs and have to take an extended period off work to care for my child?

ACT government schools do not carry any insurance for injury, disease or illness to students resulting from school activities or school organised excursions. The department is its own insurer and would have to be proven negligent before compensation was paid should a student sustain an injury during a school organised activity.

Should I take out extra insurance cover for my child whilst s/he is on the excursion?

Parents should be advised to consider whether they need to take out personal insurance cover for students. This insurance might cover contingencies such as medical/hospital expenses, ambulance transport outside the ACT, cancellation of transport/accommodation, or loss of/damage to luggage.

If I volunteer to help, as a parent, on an excursion will I need to take out insurance?

Volunteers on excursions are covered by ACT government public liability and personal

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accident insurance. This does not include personal property insurance.

Taking into account the above information and no negligence on the teachers' behalf, the wandering boy with the broken leg would be responsible for his actions (hence his parents) and no blame or claim could be made towards the teachers nor the department.

For more information or for a copy of the ACT Department 's policy on school excursions you can go to: www.decs.act.gov.au/policies/pdf/excursio.pdf For Mandatory procedures: www.decs.act.gov/policies/pdf/excpolmp.pdf

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