

Risk Management Notice

RE: School Sports and Physical Activities – Managing the Risks

Risks associated with school sports and physical activities can vary greatly from school to school, depending on those participating and the types of activities taking place. Therefore, it is difficult to provide a detailed risk management document on such a broad topic. The purpose of this bulletin is to give a brief overview of the risks and an indication of some potential strategies to address associated risks.

Individual schools must develop and implement policies and guidelines that not only address their school's specific needs, but also ensure they exercise the duty of care required under the law. School boards and administrators must ensure that these policies are developed, implemented, and followed at all times.

What are the loss exposures?

School sporting activities and physical education classes present hazards and as a result, pose risk management issues for school boards and administrators to consider. Such loss exposures include the risk of bodily injury to participants and potential liability risks to the school.

Injury to students occurs most often in physical education classes and through sporting activities. According to information provided by the B.C. Injury Research and Prevention Unit, sports and recreational injuries, both organized and informal, account for relatively few deaths (approximately 6% of deaths to those under age 20). However, these activities are associated with 17% of all hospitalized injuries, and 19% of emergency room visits.

The authors of a 1988-89 Colorado study examining the causes of school-related injuries found that formal and informal organized sports accounted for 53% of all reported injuries.

What is a school's responsibility?

Schools and their staff have duties and responsibilities to supervise all school activities and take reasonable steps to prevent injury to and ensure the safety of all students. The standard of care that a teacher owes a student under his or her supervision, as was stated in one BC Court Case, is that of a careful and prudent parent. Schools are, in turn, vicariously liable for the conduct of their teachers.

What are some risk management strategies?

In general terms, there are various risk control techniques designed to minimize or eliminate the potential for accidental losses. These techniques, which can be utilized to manage sports related risks include:

- i. Exposure avoidance – eliminate entirely the possibility of loss by not engaging in the activity.
- ii. Loss prevention – steps taken to reduce the potential for loss: i.e. safety rules and policies.
- iii. Loss reduction – this is designed to lower the severity of loss: i.e. safety equipment, waivers, permission slips, etc.
- iv. Risk transfer – outsourcing the activity by hiring a qualified organization which can provide specialized services, while assuming much of the legal responsibility.

Once the risks associated with any activity are identified and analyzed, appropriate risk control steps can be developed that best balance the school's desire to engage in a particular activity, while limiting the risk of injuries and potential liabilities.

What are some specific risk management steps that schools can implement?

- Ensure that the School Board or a duly authorized committee review and approve all school sports programs, activities and events.
- Schools should develop and implement sound Risk Management and Safety Policies with respect to all sports related risks.
- Include clear guidelines for teachers and other school staff regarding required levels of supervision with respect to activities, which take into account such matters as the actual activity and age groups involved.
- Include a clear policy that insists that an acceptable and reasonable level of care be exercised at all times by school staff to ensure that the safety of all participants is the clear priority.
- Schools must ensure that any staff involved in managing and supervising school sports programs have the appropriate training and skills required.
- Develop medical fitness statements, medical history and emergency contact forms, and permissions forms and waivers that parents can complete and sign prior to their child participating in school sporting events and/or physical education classes.
- Fully disclose the nature and scope of all risks to the parents and request parents disclose any medical conditions or limitations that may limit their child's ability to participate.
- Identify activities that require specific levels of skill and ensure those wishing to participate possess the adequate level of skill required prior to commencement.
- School policies should include emergency response procedures and strategies to deal with accidents should they occur. They should ensure staff involved with physical education and coaching have some reasonable level of First Aid training and are properly equipped to contact emergency services and have students' medical history and emergency contact information available for medical personnel.
- Some sports are more physically demanding than others; ensure participants are adequately equipped to handle the demands of the activity or sport, especially with regards to contact sports.
- Schools must ensure appropriate protective equipment is worn at all times by participants.
- School sports equipment and sports fields should be inspected regularly. Dangerous conditions or hazards that are identified should be corrected or addressed appropriately and a record made of the action taken. Inspections and any steps taken to address potential hazards should be recorded and kept on file.
- Students should be advised of the rules that apply to particular activities and the consequences they face should they break the rules.
- Demonstrations should be given to identify correct methods of performing a particular task and identifying potential hazards or risks that can exist if done incorrectly or unsafely.
- School policies should require parents to furnish the school with a note from their family physician prior to a child being permitted to resume school sports activities if they have previously sustained an injury.
- Consult with legal counsel to review appropriate areas of the school's risk management program such as forms and waivers, and to discuss legal duties.

Risk Management and Loss Control policies should be developed to address all areas of potential loss exposure such as personal injury, property, liability and financial risks. Please contact us if you would like more information on risk management for schools.

References & Resources:

1. B.C. Injury Research and Prevention Unit
Centre for Community Health and Health Evaluation Research
L408-4480 Oak Street, Vancouver,
British Columbia, Canada V6H 3V4

Report: Sports and Recreation Injury Prevention Strategies: Systematic Review and Best Practices

View Report: <http://www.injuryresearch.bc.ca/Publications/Reports/SportSystematicReport.pdf>

2. The Leisure Information Network
1185 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 502
Toronto, Ontario M3C 3C6

Web Site: <http://www.lin.ca>

Report: Exercise Caution Prevent Sports Injuries

View Report: <http://www.lin.ca/resource/html/ex.htm>