

FORGING A NEW WAY

Sarah Wiley, Deputy Head of Shawnigan Lake School

It was February 3, 2003, and I was driving the hour-long commute through the snowy roads of Muskoka to work, the head office of Outward Bound Canada (OBC) in Burk's Falls, Ontario. I was employed as the National Director of Educational Programs for OBC and in that capacity I oversaw all of the contract programs that we delivered for independent schools across the country. Turning on the radio, I heard the tragic news of the avalanche that took the lives of seven Strathcona Tweedsmuir School (STS) students who were backcountry skiing in Rogers Pass as part of their outdoor education program. I instantly knew that the landscape of outdoor education programs for custodial groups in Canada, and perhaps even North America, had changed yet again.

The phone calls began soon after that. At the time, we had 80 boys from a Toronto private school on a six-day dog sledding trip that was being run out of our wilderness base north of Thunder Bay. As the news of the tragedy spread, parents of the boys started calling Outward Bound to check on their children and their safety. In the meantime, we responded to media who wanted us to comment on the tragedy and considered our own response to the tragedy in relation to the backcountry ski programs that we ran in the Coastal Mountains of B.C. It was a time of intense reflection on our part and a time of great sadness as we could only imagine the grief experienced by the STS community. The independent school community, like the outdoor educational community, is a small and close-knit one and both felt the gravity of the event.

The Strathcona avalanche was not the first time that a tragedy involving fatalities within custodial groups had rocked the Canadian educational system. On June 12, 1978, twelve students and one adult leader from St. John's School in Claremont, Ontario drowned in the cold waters of Lake Timiskaming on a school canoe trip. James Raffan, whose account of the tragedy is so eloquently documented in his book *Deep Waters: Courage, Character and the Lake Timiskaming Canoeing Tragedy* (2002), suggests that in the grand scale of things, the tragedy raised fundamental questions about the value of risk-taking and adventure and what is acceptable risk when committing children to an outdoor educational or adventure activity or program. Despite this, the incident took on a mythic quality and seemed to fade into history. The school itself eventually shut down, but in the meantime, the number

of outdoor education programs at independent schools across the country increased.

Twenty-five years later, in the aftermath of the Strathcona-Tweedsmuir tragedy, the same questions have been raised in educational and outdoor recreational circles, but this time with a more far reaching impact on the landscape of outdoor education in Canada. The two incidents were quite different in nature. The St. John's incident breathed of negligence on the part of the school, and an inquest found deficiencies with the planning and execution of the trip, including poorly trained staff, but laid no criminal blame (Brazao, 2003). On the other hand, in the STS incident, an external review (Cloutier, 2003) found that the STS staff had delivered the standard of care expected, that the staff was well trained and the students had been well briefed on safety practices in the backcountry. The STS staff had followed best practice, but, in the end, the students became victims of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The size and reach of the avalanche was considered a freak of nature, which could not have been anticipated by the staff.

Why did the landscape change so radically after this incident? I think it is useful to look at the changing environment of independent schools that has occurred since 1978. As the number of independent schools has increased in Canada, competition for this relatively niche market has also increased. In order to maintain their competitive advantage, schools began to offer more and more attractive programs such as outdoor education and international programs. Outdoor/adventure activities previously considered dangerous became "normalized" in educational settings. As the sophistication of programs increased, so did the cost of schooling and as the costs increased, so did parent's expectations of the school and of school personnel. As Eric Roher suggests (Presentation to the CIS Heads, Sept. 2005), the duty of care on school personnel has expanded. Indeed, the standard of care expected of a teacher who is performing a highly specialized function, such as outdoor education, has been expanded to be that of an expert in that area. Thus, for some teachers, standard care is no longer enough. If they are believed to be an expert in an area, such as whitewater canoeing or rock climbing, they will be held to an expert's standard of care.

It is in this changed independent school culture that the STS tragedy occurred. In some ways, the tragedy

proved to be a watershed event in terms of shifting the landscape within which we practice outdoor education. This shift has been characterized by an implicit acknowledgement that risk is inherent in many of the activities that we engage in with our students, both on-site and off-site. Inherent risk coupled with expanded duty of care and parental expectations means that we need to create processes in our school to formally “manage” risk. Just as we formally manage the teaching and learning of students, we also need to formally manage the hazards that we are exposing the students to. Post 2003, we have seen a rise in risk management workshops and conferences for educators. Canoeis, the Canadian Network of Outdoor Educators in Independent Schools, was formed by a group of outdoor educators, mostly in Ontario, who met at a risk management workshop. Canoeis is a “forum for the professional development of the managers of outdoor education programs in independent schools in Canada. Particular focus is placed on risk management and how best to address this issue and maintain the viability and integrity of our schools’ programs and courses” (Canoeis website, <http://www.greenwoodcollege.com/geography/Taylor&Nic/oegroup/index.html>).

Most schools now have someone who actually has as part of their job description the management of risk. Some schools have hired risk officers to oversee the full spectrum of risk that the institution is exposed to and others have hired independent contractors to come in and do a risk audit of their school. Much focus has been put on improving communication to parents about the risks involved in activities that their children are engaged in; whether through parent meetings, websites, or information packages. The context within which outdoor education is practiced in independent schools has changed dramatically as a result of Feb. 1, 2003.

The internal reflection that my organization did in the aftermath of the STS avalanche was mirrored by all of the independent schools across the country. Questions that came to the forefront were: How does one manage risk? What is the appropriate balance between risk and reward? How do we continue on with outdoor programming after witnessing, albeit from the sidelines, such a tragedy? Strathcona-Tweedsmuir school was faced with the biggest challenge of all; where do we go from here?

In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, I had been inspired by the school’s handling of the post-crisis and their willingness to share their grief and their learnings with the rest of the educational community, this process managed so expertly by Mr. Glenn Odland, senior high principal at the time. I was inspired as well by the school’s insistence at not shutting the program down, a decision made after they received hundreds of letters of support for the program from alumnae, past parents,

present parents, and current students. In 2005, I joined the Strathcona-Tweedsmuir school community as Director of Student Life. Now, after working at the school myself for the last year and a half, I am inspired by the continued support and commitment of the staff to the program and by the commitment to moving forward in a way that also respects and values the previous 30 years of excellent outdoor educational programming that occurred at the school. Understandably any school culture would be affected by a tragedy of this measure. Strathcona’s journey since Feb. 1, 2003 has been a difficult one and will continue to be for some time.

One of the most significant recommendations that came from the independent review of the outdoor ed program, conducted by Mr. Ross Cloutier (2003), was that the students should not be taken on outdoor excursions that had the potential for catastrophic risks. As a result, the STS outdoor program has been reduced in scope and there are more restrictions now on where groups can travel and with whom. The students will never go back to Rogers Pass. Programmatically, there has been a renewed focus on the educational objectives of the program with the intent to maintain the educational as opposed to the adventure focus of the program. Risk management, parent communication, staff training and staff support are further priorities of the current director.

STS is still one of only a few independent schools in Canada that run and staff their outdoor program entirely out of their own school. Except for the backcountry ski expedition for the grade 10 outdoor education class, all OE trips at STS are staffed by STS faculty who have the training and certification to do so. The benefit of this model is that staff and students can build relationships outside the classroom. STS also has preserved its unique Outdoor Education credit course, which is an optional credit for grade 10 students. This model of outdoor education is one of the three models, which I will speak to in this article. The three most prevalent models of outdoor programming used by CAIS schools are:

- The self-run model in which the school runs and staffs all outdoor programming
- The sub contractor model in which schools hire out all outdoor programming to third party providers
- The mixed model in which schools employ a combination of sub contractors and self-run trips

Schools employing the self-run model are few and far between. In order to safely and confidently run and staff your own program in today’s climate, schools must have sufficient numbers of trained and experienced faculty who are able to teach in the classroom and to lead wilderness expeditions. This is becoming increasingly difficult to find

staff with this background. There are only a few university programs in Canada in which staff can get a teaching certificate along with outdoor education certification.

Secondly, school's running a self-run program must also spend a significant amount of capital on equipment and gear to adequately and safely run the program and as well, usually incur higher insurance costs because of their programs. It is costly to run your own program. Training and ongoing certification of staff, staff coverage and staff professional development all add to the costs. It is a big commitment and to my knowledge, the only schools that have been able to successfully pull it off and maintain it in this changed landscape are very small niche schools which can use their natural campus setting to their advantage, such as Rosseau Lake College in Muskoka, ON and Seburgh School, Montebello, Quebec or Lakefield College School, Lakefield, ON or a school such as STS that has a strong history and culture of running their own programs.

A sub-category of self run programs are programs that are run by a specialized group of staff within the school, who only lead outdoor trips and who do not have responsibilities to teach in any other school department. An example of this type of program is the Explore program at Collingwood School. The Explore program staff is hired solely to deliver the grade 8 and 9 outdoor education program. One of the advantages to this model is that the school hires specialists who are trained and who do not need to be pulled out of other classes in order to deliver the program. Their whole focus becomes outdoor programming, which from a risk management perspective is much more desirable.

The second model, what I have termed the "sub-contractor" model, is one in which the school out sources all of their outdoor education programming. The advantage to this model is that the school is able to manage the risk by transferring it out to a third party, which assumes liability in the event of an accident. This process would not totally relinquish the school from any liability as they still have a legal responsibility to parents to ensure that their children are not being placed in any undue risk, but it does relieve the school from some of the liability. Furthermore, the school does not have to deal with the issues related to staff and equipping a program which a school with a self run model would have to do. This can be a considerable cost saving for a school, depending on the cost of the sub-contracted services. Schools that are hoping to run a large outdoor program that all of their students will be involved in and using solely third party contractors may be looking at spending a couple of hundred thousand dollars a year on these third party services. Some schools might argue that in the long term, it is more cost-effective to run their own program but there are many factors to consider. One of the hidden costs to self-run programs is the toll on staff that are expected to

cover the course work of their main teaching area and as well, support the tripping program of the school. This can create a burn-out situation for staff and as well lead to disgruntled parents who find that their child's teacher is away frequently on outdoor trips. Toronto and Vancouver based schools, such as Branksome Hall, Crescent, Bayview Glen, Royal St. George's College, and Crofton House School, all offer a dynamic multi-year outdoor education program to its students and subcontract it all out to third party providers.

The third model, which I have termed the "mixed" model, is a combination of the above two mentioned models. Schools which use this model will run some part of their outdoor education program themselves and then hire outside providers to run other parts of their program. Typically, the larger entire grade programs or those that involve more specific training and "expert" knowledge are contracted out. In these schools, there are faculty who have the role of outdoor education coordinator or director. This individual has background and training in outdoor education and is able to run some small trips and experiences for smaller numbers of students. This individual is also responsible for coordinating the partnerships with third party providers. Smaller self run trips, combined with larger, all grade programs run by third party contractors, make up the outdoor education programming. Schools that use this model are Greenwood College School, the Bishop Strachan School, St. George's Boys School in Vancouver, Glenlyon Norfolk School in Victoria and St. Michael's University School (SMUS) in Victoria. SMUS is a good example of a school that has been able to marry faculty expertise with outside expertise to provide a rich offering of outdoor trips for students in grades 6 to 12. Students in grades 6 and 7 take part in full grade outdoor experiences based out of residential facilities. Students in grades 8 and up have a menu of outdoor trips, organized by the directors of outdoor education that they can choose from for their grade trip. The capstone outdoor education program at the school is the grade 11/12 Outdoor Leadership credit course.

A unique interpretation of this model is that run by Rothesay Netherwood School (RNS) in New Brunswick. Two years ago, RNS entered into a partnership with Outward Bound Canada, an often used provider of outdoor programming for independent schools. Outward Bound and RNS share one staff member who works for both organizations, coordinating the outdoor program at RNS and running trips, and coordinating the East coast public enrolment course offerings for Outward Bound in the summer months. The head office of the East coast branch of Outward Bound Canada is conveniently located at RNS.

In conclusion, there are many ways that independent schools across Canada are continuing to run safe yet

dynamic outdoor programming at their schools post 2003. Partnerships with third party providers combined with in house expertise allow for the most flexibility. Since the Strathcona-Tweedsmuir tragedy these programs have become under more scrutiny by the larger school community. Outdoor educators and third party providers have had to respond through improved communications to students and the larger community, through increased networking and professional development opportunities, through a commitment to ongoing skill development and refinement, and through a willingness to look beyond their own doors to learn and partner with others that are either experts in the industry or are their peers in the independent school community.

The 2003 avalanche tragedy removed the complacency that had settled over schools since the St. John's incident in 1978. Risk homeostasis theory (Wilde, 2001) states that individuals/organizations develop a personal target of how much risk they find acceptable—similar to the set point on a furnace thermostat. A person's behavior will tend to maintain risk exposure at or about that target level. Thus, as we perceive our risk becoming smaller, we increase our unsafe behavior. Therefore, implementing more policies, getting more certifications, using guides, or using safety equipment may lower our perceived risk of injury and therefore increase our risky behaviour—to a point where accident levels remain the same or, in some cases, increase. Alternatively, while we may reduce risky behaviour in one area (i.e., outdoor education) we increase risky behaviour in other areas in order to maintain a constant level of risk.

We must be diligent in our efforts to not allow the increased focus on risk management post-2003 to lead us to believe that the risk of injury in school activities is any less. We must also not let our scrutiny of outdoor education programs lessen our scrutiny on other programs, prac-

tices or situations in our schools that are inherently risky. This includes all off-site activities such as field trips, tournaments, service projects, student exchanges and international travel. This includes all activities that involve transporting students, whether by air, rail or automobile. On-site risks have increased as well. Many schools now not only have fire drill procedures but also lockdown procedures to deal with the threat of an intruder either from within the school or from the outside. The recent events at Dawson College in Montreal are an all too real reminder of this threat. The current climate calls for constant reflection and discussion about the attendant risks and the consequences of those risks in light of a school's tolerance for risk. The current climate necessitates not only that we identify risks but that we actively implement strategies to reduce risk and/or our exposure to risk in all areas of the school. We cannot afford to become complacent yet again.

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