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**Serious Incident
Management in Australia**

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Serious Incident Management in Australia

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As part of its efforts to ensure school safety, the government of New South Wales, Australia, has developed simulation exercises to better prepare principals to manage serious incidents, in collaboration with police.

In 2003, the New South Wales (NSW) State Government announced the *Safer Schools Plan* which outlined achievements, plans and the government's commitment to provide safe and secure schools. The plan strongly emphasised ensuring the personal safety of students and staff and the security of school buildings and property.

Research was conducted in the same year by Andrew Gonczi from the University of Technology, Sydney. Gonczi's study found that government schools in NSW remain safe places for children. In an average school year, most schools have no incidents of violence, with a state-wide average of 1.6 incidents per school per year.

Despite the low level of violence, NSW has an ongoing commitment to protect students, staff and buildings and to improve the way principals respond to serious incidents in schools.

SIMULATION EXERCISES

All government schools in NSW are required to have a serious incident management plan which outlines the way in which staff and students should respond to various incident types. The plan must include an evacuation component which is practised twice per year. While these planning requirements are important in preparing schools to respond to serious incidents, they do not provide opportunities for principals or their executive staff to practise the critical skills involved in effective incident management.

Through assisting schools across the state in managing serious incidents, the Safety and Security Directorate (SSD; see box on page 4) recognised that principals did not experience serious incidents very often and therefore did not have realistic opportunities to practise implementing their serious incident plans. Experience showed that in the event of a serious incident, principals are required to make critical decisions beyond their normal experience. The SSD reasoned that realistic simulation or rehearsal opportunities could improve principals' personal confidence and develop more decisiveness in managing incidents.

A key commitment made by the government as part of the Safer Schools Plan was that all principals would be provided with training to assist them to better manage serious incidents. In order to meet this commitment two specific initiatives were developed and are being implemented across NSW. The initiatives provide principals in both secondary and primary schools with the opportunity to participate in real time simulations of serious incidents.

Exercise Socrates

The Department of Education and Training and NSW Police have developed a simulation exercise for secondary principals called Exercise Socrates. This initiative utilises the NSW Police Hydra system. Over 500 secondary principals and deputy principals have participated since 2003.

The exercise involves a complex series of interrelated incidents occurring in a fictitious secondary school in real time. The simulation runs for a full school day. As the day progresses, different components of the incidents emerge which require principals to employ their serious incident management knowledge and skills as well as departmental policies. The rolling incidents include confrontations between students, allegations relating to cultural disharmony impacting from the community, the discovery of illegal substances in a locker, intelligence reports about weapons in the school and a serious assault on a senior teacher at the school.

During the simulation, principals respond to information that is provided, decide on actions that need to be taken in response to emerging issues in the scenario and outline their reasons for making particular decisions. The principals then work with police to develop a better understanding of and mutual respect for the actions required of each to effectively manage the same incident.



Exercise Socrates at police headquarters for secondary principals

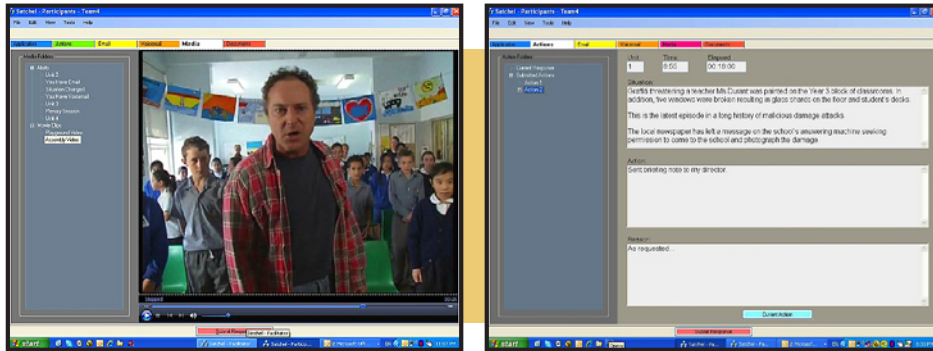
Exercise Satchel

As Exercise Socrates proved so successful with secondary school principals, a serious incident simulation called Exercise Satchel has been developed so to provide similar simulation opportunities for primary school principals.

Exercise Satchel is facilitated by specialist education officers and police officers from SSD. It is a mobile and flexible system which employs laptop computers and specialist software. It can easily be packed up and delivered to primary principals in regional areas, in conjunction with local police.

The exercise involves the unfolding of a serious incident in a fictitious primary school. The simulation runs for half of a school day. Multimedia stimulus segments are shown using the laptop computers.

Principals respond to the incident by deciding what actions to take to ensure the safety and wellbeing of staff, students and property and explaining the reasons for their preferred actions.



Specialised software has been developed to facilitate the multimedia delivery and the recording and collation of participants' responses.

As part of the exercise, principals interact with local police. They share their decisions with other participating principals and discuss the implications of and differences in their decisions.



CONCLUSION

Participation in simulation exercises allows principals, who are the key to maintaining safe working and learning environments in schools, to develop and practice incident

management strategies in a safe forum. As part of their participation, principals are able to develop their confidence in carrying out appropriate strategies. The fact that they participate in the simulation, with colleagues from neighbouring schools and in a collegial learning environment where the complexity of an incident can be presented in real time, makes simulation exercises an effective training strategy.

Both simulation exercises which are being implemented by SSD, Socrates and Satchel, have been specifically designed for use with principals and police to improve serious incident response and management in government schools in NSW. Feedback from participating principals and police has been highly positive.

Safety and Security Directorate

Safety and Security is a specialised directorate within the NSW Department of Education and Training. The directorate consists of two operational units.

School Safety and Response Unit (SSRU):

Officers appointed to the SSRU support school principals in the management and reporting of serious crimes that occur in schools and other incidents involving violence, weapons or illegal drugs. The unit's staff includes experienced teachers with expertise in serious incident management in schools as well as three police officers ranging in rank from detective inspector to senior constable.

School Security Unit (SSU):

Officers attached to the SSU are responsible for the physical security of approximately 2 200 government schools across the state of New South Wales. The unit provides schools with a comprehensive range of security related services including security alarm system design, security training and awareness programmes, as well as advice on security related matters (e.g. surveillance systems, guard services, emergency evacuations, managing school keys).

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