

## Crisis Plan Considerations for School Global Travel Programs

Dear colleagues,

The recent earthquake, devastating tsunami, and nuclear crisis in Japan have, if nothing else, been the tipping point in piquing awareness (and concern) around the issues of students and school groups traveling overseas who might find themselves “caught” in such events. The Japan crisis is added to other recent global events such as the earthquakes in New Zealand, Haiti, and Chili, unrest in the Middle East, Thailand, and Mexico, and other more localized concerns.

While schools should by no means decide to “scratch” their global travel programs unequivocally, it is important to have a plan in place to guide the decision-making process. And when you do choose to send the trip, it is equally important to be as prepared as you can and to have risk and crisis management plans in place.

There are inherent risks to any sort of travel and to specific destinations, cultures, and environments. As well, natural disasters and “acts of God” are inherently unpredictable and by definition, are outside of human control and perhaps unavoidable. That said, with appropriate planning, a school can be in a good position to manage and address risk issues and events if and when they arise during an international travel experience.

Below are some issues and questions to consider. While this list is not exhaustive, it can launch your risk management review. As always, it is important to review any crisis, emergency, and risk management plans with an attorney familiar with the laws in your state as well as to have your insurance representative review your plan.

First and foremost, as mentioned above, have a thorough, known, and practiced (when possible) risk management plan in place for your international travel programs. Responding to a crisis will depend on the basic elements of a plan already being in place, before you leave town.

1. **US Embassy:** Register the group with the local US Embassy before you leave. In a situation such as Japan, the government is discouraging and in some cases prohibiting travel to certain areas, even by loved ones looking for missing family members. Registering your group would be a first line of support in a crisis.
2. **Insurance:** Have appropriate insurance, know your coverages *and limitations*, develop a relationship with your insurance representative, and know how to access insurance. The moment a crisis hits is not the time to be navigating the nuances and complications of your insurance system, nor is it the time to discover you thought you were covered for something you are not.
3. **Training:** Your leaders should be trained and orientated to the school’s expectations and plans in an emergency and/or crisis. The leader should be trained in responding to and stabilizing an emergency with or in the group (this may include first aid training as well as group facilitation skills and site or scene management) as well as trained in how to initiate the emergency or crisis management plan at your school and when or if to include local authorities.

4. **Site/Event Analysis:** A site and event analysis should be a component of your crisis management plan. In the event of a global crisis while students are abroad, such an analysis would include identifying potential crisis events for the specific area to which you are traveling and making a specific plan for each. For example, Japan is an area of high earthquake activity, and earthquakes apparently happen “all the time.” It would not be unreasonable to have a plan for responding to such an event when you take students to that country. Similarly, you might consider a flooding event if you took a trip to India during the monsoon. Generalized events for which to prepare in any country might include power outages or work stoppages (e.g. transportation strikes).
5. **Important Documents:** It is wise to leave copies of passports, visas, and other vital information (individual health, emergency contact, and insurance information) at home. It is also wise to carry hard and electronic copies of this information with the group, separate from the originals. Consider keeping copies of the group and individual information on a smart phone (it might be able to be emailed or texted if needed) and on a thumb drive to be kept on one’s person at all times. On an early news report about Japan, a young American woman had arrived in Sendai the day of the earthquake, and lost her passport immediately in the ensuing events. She was telling the reporter that her ability to move depended on this one issue.
6. **Emergency kit:** Consider having your group carry an emergency kit. This kit may include medical first aid essentials specific for the country to which you are travelling, and may also include a water purification tool (e.g. MIOX, Steripen), extra batteries, “back-up” prescriptions, language translation book, an emergency plan checklist, money, pen and paper, and emergency contact names and numbers. You might also consider carrying a backup power source like a small travel solar panel that can charge phones and even laptops. There are many of these on the market that are very affordable and packable.
7. **Finances:** Part of financial preparation for the school should be to have an accessible cash flow (e.g. a specific bank account) should an emergency overseas require quick access to money to cover immediate and potential large expenses. As well, groups should have various forms of access to money in-country including cash, debit cards, and a high limit credit card to cover large group expenses.

These are just a few components of a risk and crisis management plan. This list is not exhaustive and completing each task will not prevent a crisis or emergency, nor will it completely protect you from loss. However, these preparations will help you to be better prepared when planning for your group to travel overseas.

I wish you happy and safe travels,  
Ann McCollum

© 2011 Do not reprint, reproduce, or distribute this content without the author’s permission.

Ann McCollum Consulting, LLC  
Risk Management and Experiential Program Design in Education  
www.annmccollum.com • info@annmccollum.com • 505.255.2650