Education and young people – forces for change?

The United Nations 2000 World Disaster Reduction Campaign has as its theme, 'disaster reduction, education and youth'. Its aim is to continue building a culture of prevention through education channels so that the youth of today can play an active role in reducing the impact of disasters in the future. Indeed the campaign states that, 'A culture of prevention is something that forms over time. What is needed is a change in our attitude, based on the conviction that we do not need to be fatalistic about disaster risks and a willingness to act upon that conviction. This mind-set is best developed at an early age.'

Consequently schools, particularly students, present as an important ingredient in developing a culture of prevention. Young people learn easily and care about making the world a safer place. Encouraging their direct participation will also help them develop a greater sense of their own responsibilities. It is envisaged that the development of a national approach to emergency management school education will encourage the vision of a safer community.

During the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) 1990–1999, the Australian IDNDR Coordination Committee developed a strategy to support school education and disaster reduction. The aim was to include information in school curricula on prevention strategies for, and the effects of natural hazards on, communities. This strategy aimed to raise the level of community awareness and education regarding natural hazard risk and disaster prevention and preparedness through the school system. The challenge was to shift the emphasis from a concentration on natural hazards and their potentially disastrous effects on communities, towards exploring risk awareness and management options for vulnerability reduction.

The approach targeted teachers and subject associations using the development of quality curriculum-based disaster education resources expected to maximise the teaching of this topic in classrooms. Key to its success was the strong influence of teacher advocates and the targeting of school children which sought to encourage long-term change in attitude and behaviour regarding natural hazards. Over time this could be expected to permeate to the adult community.

December 1999 marked the end of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction and the full time secretariat within Emergency Management Australia. The decade has seen significant progress in the approach to emergency management school education. Nevertheless, there needs to be a concerted effort to ensure the impetus generated is maintained. How might this be achieved?

In June 2000, a school education workshop was held at the Australian Emergency Management Institute (AEMI) , Mt Macedon, Victoria where representatives from emergency management and school education agencies gathered together in a cooperative effort to develop an appropriate policy and strategy. One of the proposed outcomes was to develop an agreement between the states and territories in framing a uniform approach to school education that would support the National Emergency Management Committee's vision of 'a safer community'. In his keynote address Associate Professor John Lidstone, Queensland University of Technology, noted that the agendas of school curriculum and emergency management needed to overlap in order to achieve its public safety goal.

The workshop identified four clear policy objectives in support of a nationally coordinated approach:
• to develop and maintain a coordinated approach to enhancing community safety and emergency management through school education;
• to facilitate on-going working partnerships between the emergency management and school education communities
• to support current school curricula in such a way as to encourage understanding and application of Australia's agreed approach to community safety and Emergency Management
• to support and complement current State and Territory school education initiatives in community safety and Emergency Management.

These objectives incorporate the strategy of the international decade but acknowledge the need for cooperation and goodwill across governments, communities and organisations. The promotion of partnerships and mutual obligation is central to achieving the vision of 'a safer community'.

Similar sentiments are expressed in the foreword to the *National Emergency Management Strategic Plan 2000–2005* where it is noted that those involved at the Commonwealth, State and regional levels in emergency management in Australia need to adopt and implement arrangements aimed at reducing the vulnerability of our communities through proactive rather than reactive means. Schools not only can be used to disseminate knowledge but also can be an interface between those who seek to reduce the impact of disasters and the less accessible groups at risk within a community such as family groups.

While there is a continuing need to reiterate the important emergency management messages and develop and market quality teaching materials a nationally coordinated approach with clear objectives is necessary to ensure such an 'interface' is nurtured. Recent endorsement of this national approach by the National Emergency Management Executive Group and an ongoing resourcing commitment by Emergency Management Australia to support this priority are catalysts for action. The workshop 'Implementing Emergency Management School Education' to be held at AEMI in early October will see the consolidation of the arrangements required to support a nationally coordinated approach.

John Fitzgerald
School Education Officer
Emergency Management Australia