



Learning in the Time of Zika

Ross Wehner, Founder, World Leadership School

Long ago, when I worked as an instructor for the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), I remember watching my students as we crossed a glacier in the Pacific Northwest. It was near the end of a month-long course and the students were leading their own rope teams. The first team was focused intently on navigating a series of 1-2 foot wide crevasses. As each student stepped over the crack in the glacier, he or she would peer into the inky darkness, mesmerized by the sound of rushing water far below. What they did not notice as they advanced up the glacier was a nearby collection of rocks on the snow-covered glacier. I knew it would be almost impossible for a student to fall deeply enough into a crevasse to become injured, given the careful rope work I was seeing and the physics involved. But those rocks, which were falling from a cliff heated by the morning sun, were a lethal danger. The crevasses were obvious, huge, and terrifying. But the rocks were harder for the students to see, even though they were far more deadly. In risk management terms, the crevasses were a *perceived* danger whereas the rocks were an *actual* danger.

This distinction between perceived and actual danger, a timeless principle of outdoor risk management, is more important than ever given the frequency of global travel and other off-campus programs in schools today. On one hand, independent schools are trying to make learning more student-driven, experiential, and world-connected. As part of this shift, teachers are taking students off campus as never before for a growing number of field trips, service learning days, internships, interims, and domestic and global trips. But, on the other hand, schools are besieged by a constant stream of information about Zika, global terrorism, and other lethal hazards. How can we take students out into a world filled with so many unknown dangers?

Some independent schools have taken what seems like a sensible approach. They have hired risk management assessors, talked to legal counsel, and listened to parents. But the result has been an increase in worrying information and a resulting state of paralysis and indecision. Not surprisingly, boards at some independent schools this year cancelled student travel to any countries classified by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) as Level 2 Zika countries. In one fell swoop, all of Central and South America, and the Caribbean, have become a no-go zone for students. School leaders are saying “no” to off-campus learning in a time when we need to be saying “yes.”

An alternative approach, which schools already use in admissions, marketing and almost every other area of operations, is to use data to put together a plan. Unfortunately, there is remarkably little data on injuries and fatalities in the \$15 billion study abroad industry, which each year sends an estimated 270,000 American students abroad. At [World Leadership School](http://WorldLeadershipSchool.org), we have studied available



data, especially the U.S. State Department’s website on [US Citizen Deaths Overseas](#), and built the following probability study of risks that could either seriously injure or kill traveling students:¹

Highway accidents — 37%

Bus/Train/Air/Boats - 10%

Drowning — 26%

Other (fires, falls, sickness, assault, etc.) — 24%

Pedestrian (usually being hit by a car in an urban setting) - 2%

Natural disaster - 1%

Here are a few takeaways from this data:

1. *Half of the total risk to students happens when they move locations, especially on the highway.* Message: stay in one place if possible, especially in countries with weak tort law, chaotic traffic, and poor highway systems. Develop careful procedures around highway travel. Consider the idea of “less is more”: can we go deeper with our learning if we spend more time in fewer locations?

2. *A quarter of the total risk to students is drowning.* Message: take swimming very seriously. At World Leadership School, we rarely allow students to go deeper than chest-deep in rivers and oceans, and we never allow diving. When swimming, our instructors follow clear protocols and use throw ropes, life jackets, etc.

3. *The remaining quarter of risk is a grab bag of fires, falls, sickness and pedestrian travel.* Message: students should be aware of fire evacuation routes in hotels and especially homestays. Train leaders to spot hard-to-see, high-consequence situations such as paths that lead alongside steep drops in terrain. Know where medical facilities are located in the event of student sickness and be proactive about getting students to a doctor when sick.

We have also analyzed other sources of data, including a [Critical Incident Database](#) maintained by the [Forum on Education Abroad](#), whose 650 institutional members collectively represent 90% of U.S. students that study abroad; a private database maintained by the [Depart Smart](#), an organization seeking to bring greater transparency to the study abroad industry; and a [study of claims form K-](#)

¹ In analyzing this data, we removed war-torn countries where we do not travel, such as Afghanistan and Syria. We disregarded two large categories for homicides (which we believe are caused by criminal activity, drugs/alcohol, or travel in unsafe urban areas where we do not go) and suicide (which we hope to avoid through pre-program student screening and group dynamics training, which encourages communication and supportive group environments).



[12 study abroad programs](#) from United Educators, an insurance company. From these additional sources, we make additional conclusions:

4. Alcohol changes everything. The Forum on Education Abroad's data identifies alcohol, along with poor judgment, as the leading factors in all incidents. More than three quarters of all incidents happened during free time periods. Message: make it clear that alcohol/drugs while traveling is a serious danger and means immediate evacuation. Carefully screen students, and set expectations, before a program to minimize behavioral incidents. Review nighttime supervision protocols, especially in urban areas where the risks of student alcohol abuse are higher. Limit free time.

5. Sexual assault is a hidden iceberg. United Educators reports that 62 percent of their K-12 study abroad claims between 2004-2013 were for sexual assault. Of the sexual assault claims, nearly 40 percent happened in a homestay. Message: provide clear training for trip leaders and students around sexual assault. Carefully screen and train any homestay families, even in exchange programs with long-time partner schools. Run debriefs, and group dynamics activities, in order to help students communicate telltale signs of a potentially bad situation.

It's interesting to note that Zika and global terrorism do not appear in our data, even though they are top of mind for so many school leaders and parents today. There were thousands of stories about Zika before this year's Brazil Olympics, but almost no coverage of the fact that not a single person contracted Zika during the Olympics, according to the [World Health Organization](#).

There is no question that Zika is a disease worth understanding, along with other insect-borne diseases such as dengue, malaria, chagas, leishmaniasis, and chikungunya that have existed for years in popular tropical travel locations like Costa Rica. Zika stands out of course because of its link to birth defects and the Guillan-Barre syndrome, but all these diseases can have serious consequences.

Nonetheless, I would argue that the intense media coverage of Zika this year caused many schools to overemphasize Zika in relationship to the other, more significant, hazards to students traveling abroad. This makes effective risk management more difficult.

We certainly live in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world. In these times, it's more important than ever to use data to understand the actual risks and rely on simple, timeless risk management principles. One of these principles I learned as a wilderness educator is that good risk management results from conversation between people, not a complicated list of hard-to-remember rules and procedures. In my opinion, the most valuable approach to risk management is to have a continuous conversation at all levels of the school.



At World Leadership School, which runs travel programs for about 600 students per year, we use a tool called *Analyze-Manage-Prepare (AMP)* to organize the conversation. This tool is similar to others at NOLS, Outward Bound, and most other outdoor education organizations. Each morning on our programs, student leadership teams hold AMP sessions in which they ask: What are the risks to *analyze* today? How will we *manage* them? And what should we do now to *prepare*? Students need to practice their risk management skills on a daily basis in order to develop situational awareness for risks they never face back home.

These AMP conversations need to happen at all levels of the school. AMP conversations should happen between *trip leaders* as they make important decisions about their trip itinerary and prepare students in advance of traveling. These conversations should happen between *administrators* as they decide between different trip offerings and plan trip leader trainings. AMP should also happen with *parents*, especially during the parent nights when trip leaders recruit students for their program. During this critical meeting, trip leaders talk about all the amazing things students will do and learn on a certain trip. But they also have a duty to disclose activities and associated risks, how the school is managing the risks, and how parents and students should prepare accordingly.

In my experience, school leaders do not spend enough time investing in these critical conversations before and after a travel program. Trip leaders need time to train, get organized, and design learning goals for a program. Trip leaders and students need time to begin the learning, form a strong group dynamic, and set behavioral expectations. After a program, students need to reflect on and demonstrate their learning, and teachers and school leaders need to debrief, review evaluations, and improve the program. We should heed the words of American educational reformer John Dewey: “We do not learn from experience . . . we learn from reflecting on experience.” As schools, we will both better manage risks and deepen learning by allotting time, before and after an off-campus program, for more adult and student reflection.

This community-wide conversation about risk and learning allows school leaders to develop simple and easy-to-remember risk management protocols that evolve and improve each year with community feedback. With this solid foundation, we are in a stronger position to explore an ever-expanding landscape of emerging risks. Zika is worth studying, but we cannot let the media drive and distort the risk management conversation by making us believe that *perceived* risks are *actual* risks. We need to use data, and tools such as AMP, to organize the conversation.

Classroom learning has never had to change so quickly and so completely, and independent schools are helping lead the charge. In the future of learning, which is already here for many schools, students will venture off campus as never before and risk and failure will be an intrinsic part of their daily experience. It’s time for school leaders to become professional risk managers who can distinguish



between perceived and actual dangers and lead a productive conversation across the school community about risk and learning.

School leaders become paralyzed when they ask: “How do we manage every single risk?” Given the time and resource constraints in schools, a better question is: “What are the actual risks and how might we manage them better?” This latter question sparks the kinds of conversations that school communities need to be having, at all levels of the school.