

SCHOOL PRINCIPALS: DISASTER STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES

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Affected Schools Project

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AUSTRALIAN CHILD & ADOLESCENT TRAUMA, LOSS & GRIEF NETWORK

THE AUTHOR

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She is currently Professor of Psychological Medicine at the Australian National University and Professor of Population Mental Health & Disaster at the University of Western Sydney. She has chaired the National Prevention, Promotion and Early Intervention Working Party and has written numerous reports relevant to the prevention and management of trauma, loss and grief as they affect children, adolescents and families. In 1984, Professor Raphael was made a member of the Order of Australia (AM) for her work in mental health and in 2008 the Royal Australian New Zealand College of Psychiatrists awarded her the College Medal of Honour – its most prestigious award for distinguished and meritorious service.

ACATLGN is a national collaboration to provide expertise, evidence-based resources and linkages to support children and their families through the trauma and grief associated with natural disasters and other adversities. It offers key resources to help school communities, families and others involved in the care of children and adolescents.

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Introduction

School principals are familiar with the needs of their school and their school communities and have dealt with many crises. The challenges wrought by the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria (February 2009) in the acute phase and immediate aftermath will, for many, have been the most serious challenge ever faced: a great many schools have been significantly affected, tens of thousands of students impacted and some schools lost. Staff and students have died in these fires and many who have themselves survived have lost loved ones, or others close to them. Principals, teachers and school communities have been similarly affected, and for some schools these effects have been particularly intense.

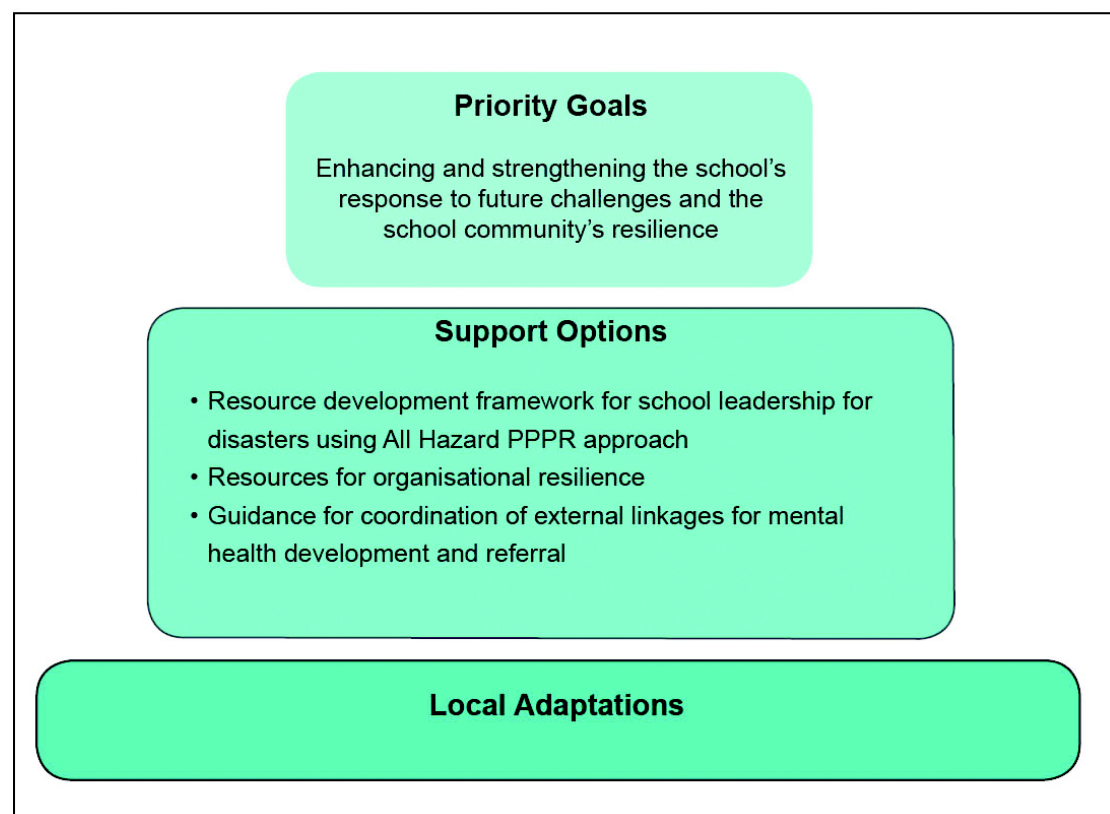
Responses over time will be lead by the principals and their school communities. Several key themes are important in informing responses to such disasters and their ongoing consequences. These utilise what is known about disasters, the psychosocial impacts, recovery and the leadership that principals already provide through such circumstances. These themes then also build on many existing and new initiatives.

These themes outlined below can inform response, and can also be adapted to the principals' and schools' particular needs. They are proposed because they have been identified as important frameworks to assist in recovery processes.

Principles and strategies to assist schools in disaster recovery

1. *Positive and hopeful school environments*

Ensuring a positive, hopeful and optimistic school environment that focuses on mastery and on the future, while compassionately acknowledging sadness and pain.



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Principals play an important role in shaping the organisational culture of their school. Research evidence shows that building positive trajectories, for example highlighting what has worked or is working well, enthusiasm and positive feeling about what is being done, reinforces future development of a positive emotional response and more optimistic trajectories. This may be difficult in the face of the sadness, grief and anger that are frequent at such times.

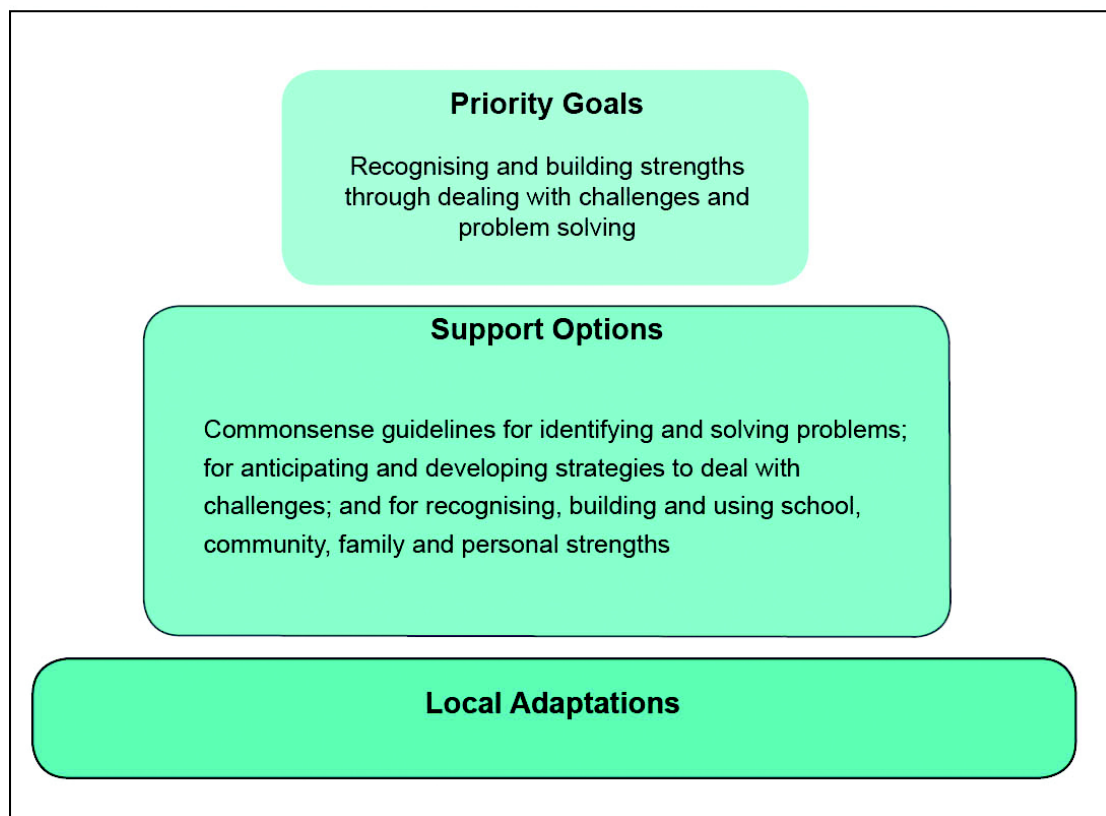
Hopeful, enthusiastic trajectories can coexist with the recognition of ongoing problems. It is important to encompass both themes, 'multi-channelling' the more positive sense of survival while addressing and recognising difficulties. While acknowledging the reality that there have been diverse experiences and that multiple feelings and responses exist, building the 'hope' and 'positive' themes helps renewal and recovery. Positive and hopeful environments are enhanced by a focus on:

- Achievements and their celebration across the spectrum of school activities
- Building strong profiles for school and student health and wellbeing including exercise, sport and nutrition themes
- Recreation, pleasurable and positive activity profiles
- School/community engagement in positive activities together with future orientation
- Recognition that positive connections with others, good relationships, trust, safety and participation reinforce the school's '**social capital**' and that this is a major contribution to recovery
- Enhancing learning opportunities, as well as sustaining learning goals to build the school's '**educational capital**' for the school community, for instance with disaster learning that's science-focused
- Enhancing the caring ethos of the school at all levels of the school community, of being sensitive to others and caring for one another through 'tough times', to build the school's '**human capital**'
- Enhancing resilient trajectories and compassionate environments. These themes interact with and are reflected in the domains listed in the other themes
- Strengthening two way, multi-level external linkages and interactions so as to enhance the school's '**bridging capital**'.

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2. *Building on strengths to develop resilience*

Identifying and building on the strengths and capacities of the school and all members of the school community is a theme inherent in principals' expertise and roles. Strengths-based strategies can help schools and students be more resilient through tough times. Research has shown that considering threats as 'challenges' rather than 'stresses' can contribute to better outcomes.



Recognising strengths and achievements can help schools deal with the current and new crises related to the aftermath. New challenges may emerge related to reports and findings such as the Royal Commission; fears related to the next fire season; triggers of reminders and anniversaries which may bring back the fear, grief and distress of the incident; other threats, for instance related to swine flu; financial crises; further deaths and losses and so forth.

Recognising ongoing difficulties and developing strategies to deal with these is important, such as taking problems apart and solving them bit by bit as this will build strengths for addressing future, potentially problematic events.

Recognising the courage and achievement of all members of the school community in dealing with ongoing losses and problems, can help towards greater feelings of competence and optimism.

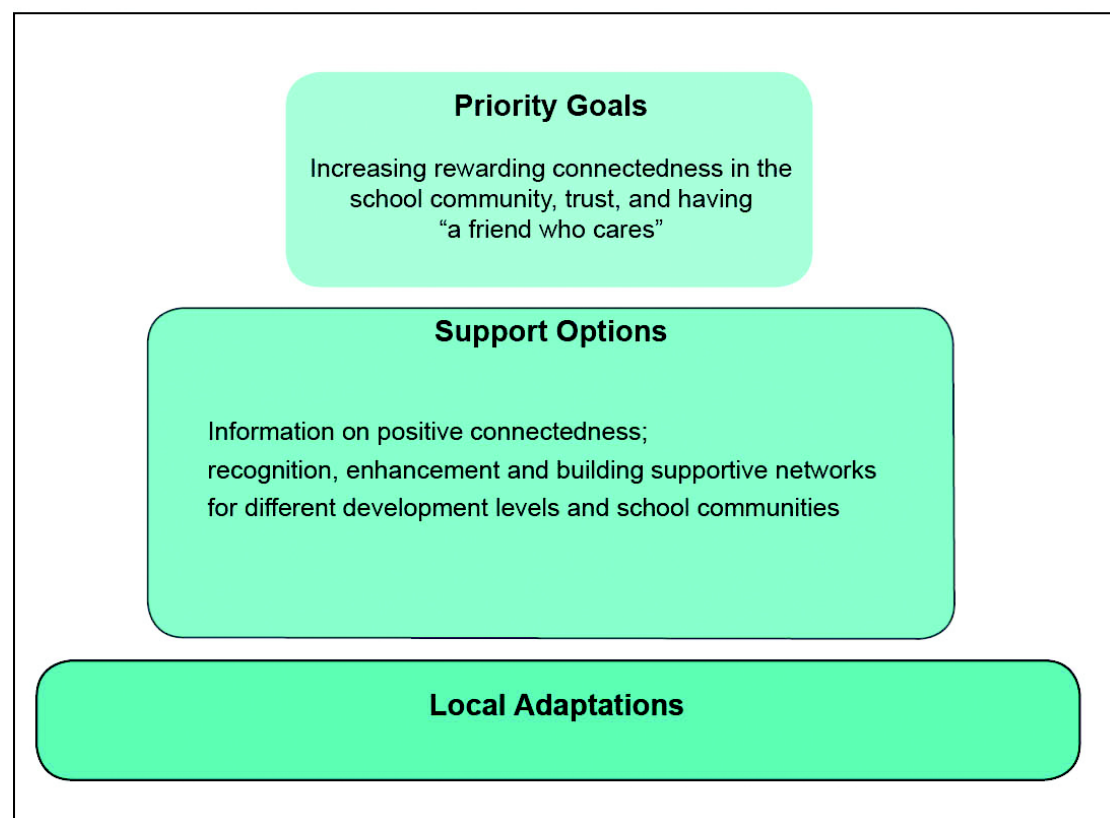
Recognising the achievement of learning goals, the recovery steps taken, and a capacity to 'stay with' objectives through difficulties can build 'credit' and contribute to resilience.

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Sporting activities and competition, can contribute through enhanced connectedness, self-efficacy and physical well-being.

3. *Enhancing connectedness and mutual support*

Connectedness and mutual support, research suggests, can lessen the risk of adverse mental health outcomes for children and families after a traumatic experience. Social and emotional wellbeing can help to build relationships, raise awareness of others' needs and contribute to positive learning environments.



Connectedness can be built through classroom strategies and through establishing it as important to the school ethos. This is a key theme to which principals and teachers bring great strengths and knowledge. It is also important to recognise the conflict that can arise and detract from connectedness – for example those who have had what might seem to be an unfair advantage in access to resources in the recovery period as perceived by those who feel they had less.

Spontaneous groups frequently develop with those who have 'been through the same thing' in the fire, or through other 'special', 'different' experiences. Helping set an ethos where there is open acknowledgement of diverse experiences, diverse needs, multiple levels of knowledge about what can help and what can be done

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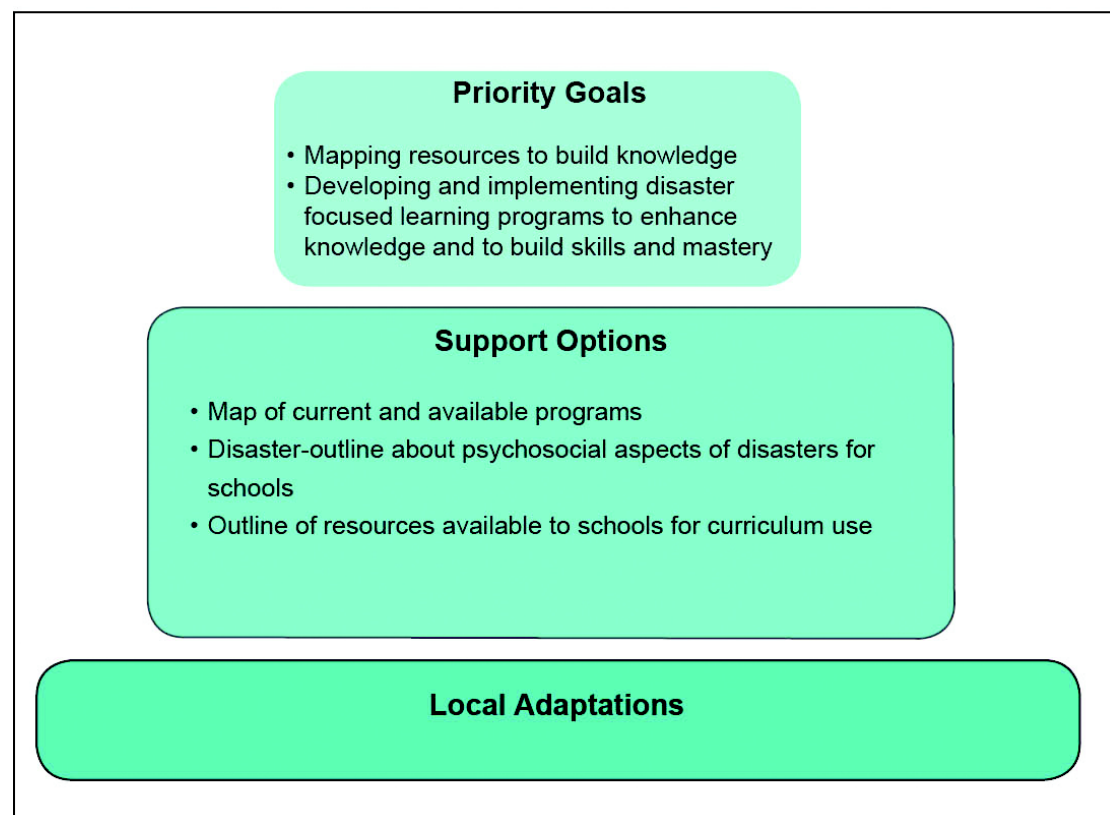
over time can help to lessen the risk of splits developing in the school community. This can reinforce a view of 'connect and learn', 'connect and care' and 'connect and rebuild for the future'. Building different 'connect' goals is likely to be helpful e.g. connect for 'learning how to manage.....'

There is also sound scientific evidence that connectedness is a strong aspect of resilience – for instance, the connectedness of a good relationship with at least one parent; 'connectedness' in the school with positive peer relationships, 'connection' with teachers; these are all helpful to handling many developmental challenges as well as adversities.

Connections which provide opportunities to share feelings and problems, which contribute to the sense of being valued, where there are feelings of trust, mutual regard and understanding are likely to contribute to positive wellbeing and strengths to deal with adversity.

4. *Information, learning, knowledge building*

Information and knowledge about disasters can help those affected gain a sense of mastery over the fears that may have arisen in such circumstances as the Black Saturday Bushfires in Victoria (February 2009) and can help to increase capacity to deal with future threats.



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Principals and their schools are committed to these goals, and bring the greatest levels of expertise in taking these themes forward. It is very important to the mastery of and recovery from disasters such as the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria (February 2009) that information and knowledge are built through effective learning processes. This encompasses understanding disasters generally, and the nature of their impacts on mental health and wellbeing for individuals and communities; for children of different ages; their effects for society more broadly and over time; and what can be done through the long aftermath, to facilitate understanding, recovery and renewal. There is a very large amount of information available so guidance of useful knowledge and dealing with emergencies is essential. Furthermore, information about resources, what is helpful and for whom at different stages post-disaster, are additional elements.

This theme is very important because knowing more about threats and what can be done to mitigate and manage these can be a major factor in helping recovery. Including an understanding of prevention and preparedness components can assist people to develop some sense of control over these events and their possible future occurrence. Learning about disasters and the All Hazard approach of Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery is likely to be helpful for all members of the school community.

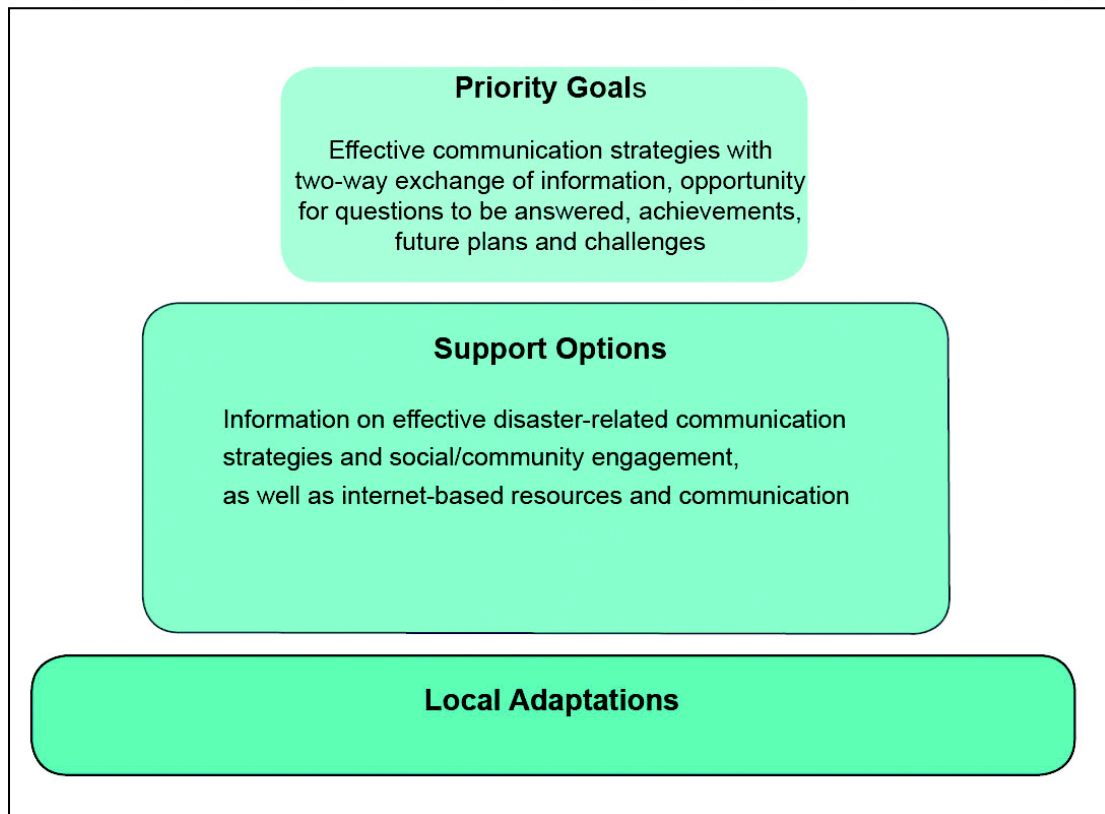
Core information for principals' learning over time, for teachers and for students and the school community is helpful in understanding the nature of disaster hazards and their relationship to the reactions of the self and others. It helps also to identify what can be useful and when help is needed, and how it might be accessed. Such curricula can be adapted to schools' needs, but ideally are based on research and knowledge, built in Australia and international contexts, and provided in supportive, effective ways.

It is recognised that these themes are also sensitive for many affected persons and schools but it is possible that they can be delivered in supportive ways, and materials developed with provision for this. Concurrent support processes in the school can also assist.

Capacity to critically appraise available information, to not be further traumatised by it, as well as accessing information resources for recovery (e.g. online, websites), is a further important learning strategy in this context.

5. *Communication strategies*

Effective communication strategies are critical for consulting with stakeholders, to identify need, to develop resources and programs and publicise strategies and develop collaborative relationships.



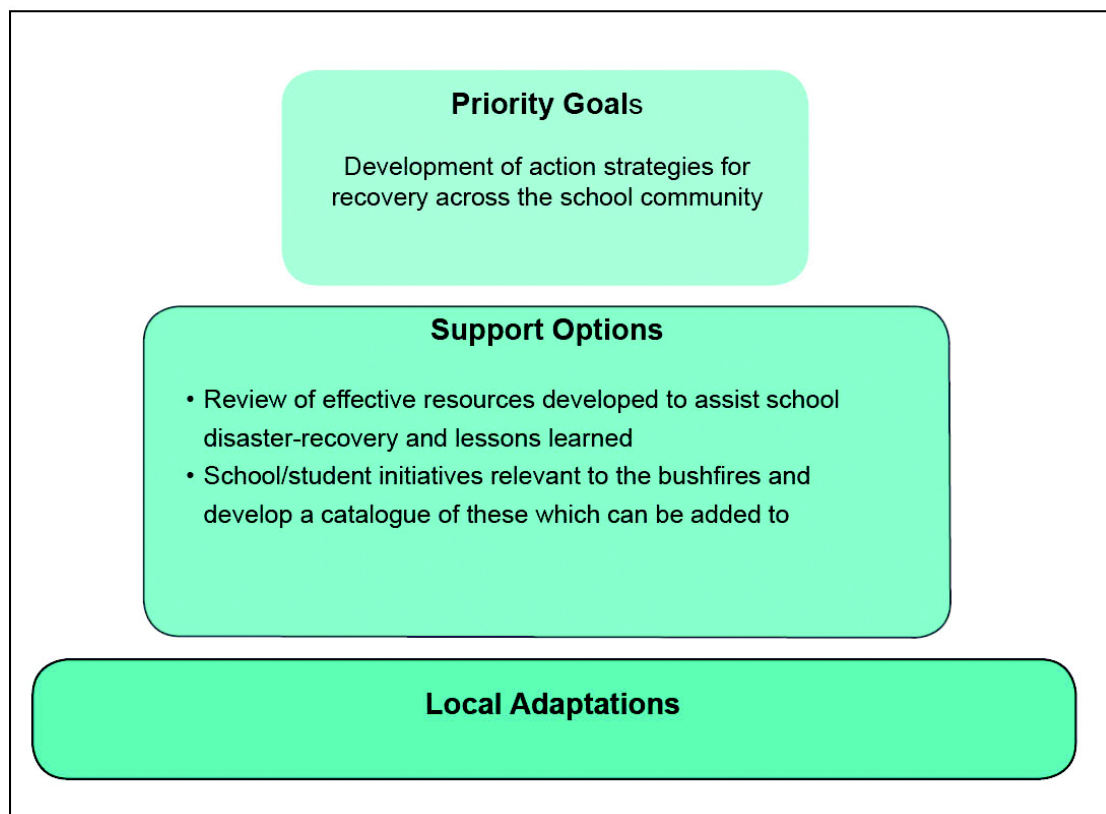
Communication within the school community and wider community regarding the bushfires, and their aftermath should build on existing frameworks. Some initiatives that have been shown to be helpful include a newsletter to parents (online or other). A valuable process can include initiatives developed through student groups, which also link to the strategies, which support active involvement in one's own recovery processes. This is one aspect of the capacity for 'hands-on' actions. Many schools have used newsletters to keep members of the school community informed and as a way to educate parents and students about disaster response and recovery. Increasing communication with school community members in times of challenge allows for enhancing connectedness.

The value of such initiatives is that they contribute to the school's own 'history', recognition and validation of the challenges faced and dealt with, the courage and compassion mobilised, the fighting of fire and fear and the creativity in dealing with despair and ongoing difficulties, as well as understanding achievements and future plans and providing information relevant to mental health and wellbeing, and strategies and services available.

Communication strategies should occur through multiple channels and include newsletters, websites, paper-based resources, call-lines if appropriate, radio, television and information meetings and groups.

6. *Actions for recovery and renewal*

There is research indicating that engagement in actions that are directed towards one's own and one's community recovery can contribute to better psychosocial outcomes. Principals play a very important role in recognising and encouraging initiatives within the school environment, particularly those that enhance learning and social development, assist problem solving and planning for the future and in monitoring these for safety and positive outcomes.



Creative endeavours such as art, theatre or production of materials for entertainment, songs, concerts, films and the like have all been identified as helpful. Positive factors probably come from shared group processes, such as class projects, or groups for mutual support, particularly if these identify goals and actions. Activities that have a creative process frequently arise spontaneously from student groups, such as those affected by the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria (February 2009).

Of particular importance are the narratives or stories that may be written as people give some level of testimony about their experience. There is strong research evidence that writing about one's traumatic experience can be helpful and lessen adverse mental health effects. This is also indicated by the large numbers of books that appear telling stories of people's disaster experiences, or indeed books drawn together of the experiences of communities. The ways people tell stories of their experiences may also reflect their strengths and vulnerabilities in ongoing ways – for instance ongoing anger, being unable to look to the future, or very negative preoccupations that may indicate problems.

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Play activities may reflect similar themes for young children. There may be a process whereby children gain some sense of mastery or control. However research has also shown that play which keeps on reflecting the traumatic circumstances may indicate the child's ongoing trauma and vulnerability.

Memorials are an important part of the grieving process. How students and schools develop memorials for those that have died, or for other losses, can be very important. These may arise spontaneously as a positive tribute; memoirs may be put together in photos, stories or other ways of remembering. Being tuned to these initiatives and making opportunities for them are important, but students may need support to progress these issues. This can be sensitively negotiated in collaboration with relevant others – for instance surviving family members.

The outputs of these and other initiatives that develop during the aftermath can provide a significant testimony and become part of the history and achievements of the group and the school community in the journey of recovery and renewal.

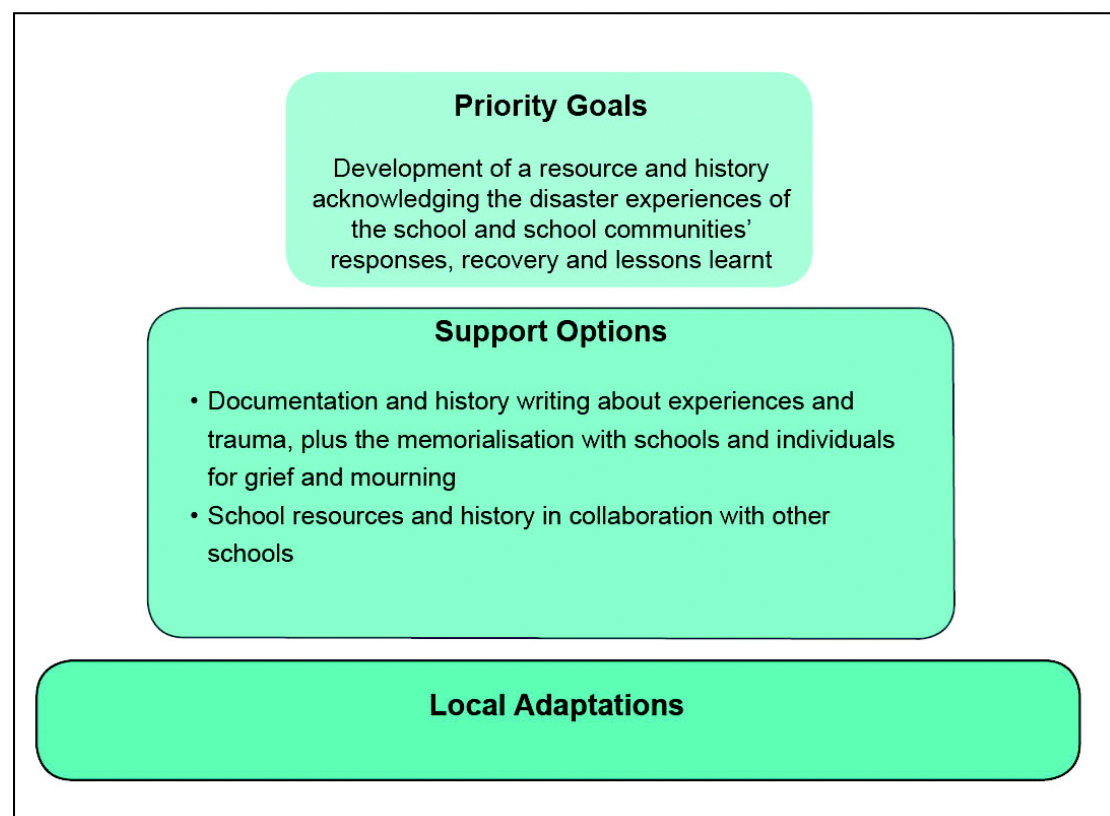
Social networking and internet initiatives may also grow in this way. An ethos of encouraging positive, creative development which demonstrates strengths, compassion and sensitivity to other's needs and vulnerabilities can contribute to the sense of mastery of the disaster, hope, and to the social development of those involved.

Schools can provide a safe environment for positive initiatives of this kind to develop, enhancing student and organisational contributions to positive recovery and resilience. One of the key aspects of these action processes is that they represent ways of and contribute to making meaning of disaster and catastrophe and giving some structure for this.

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7. *'Looking after' memories; acknowledging what has happened and what has followed*

Principals, in their ongoing leadership of schools recognise that there is a need to own what school communities have experienced, the good and bad; the losses and gains; courage, vulnerability, mistakes and achievements. These strategies contribute to making meaning of what happened and what has been done, and help to shape future adaptations.

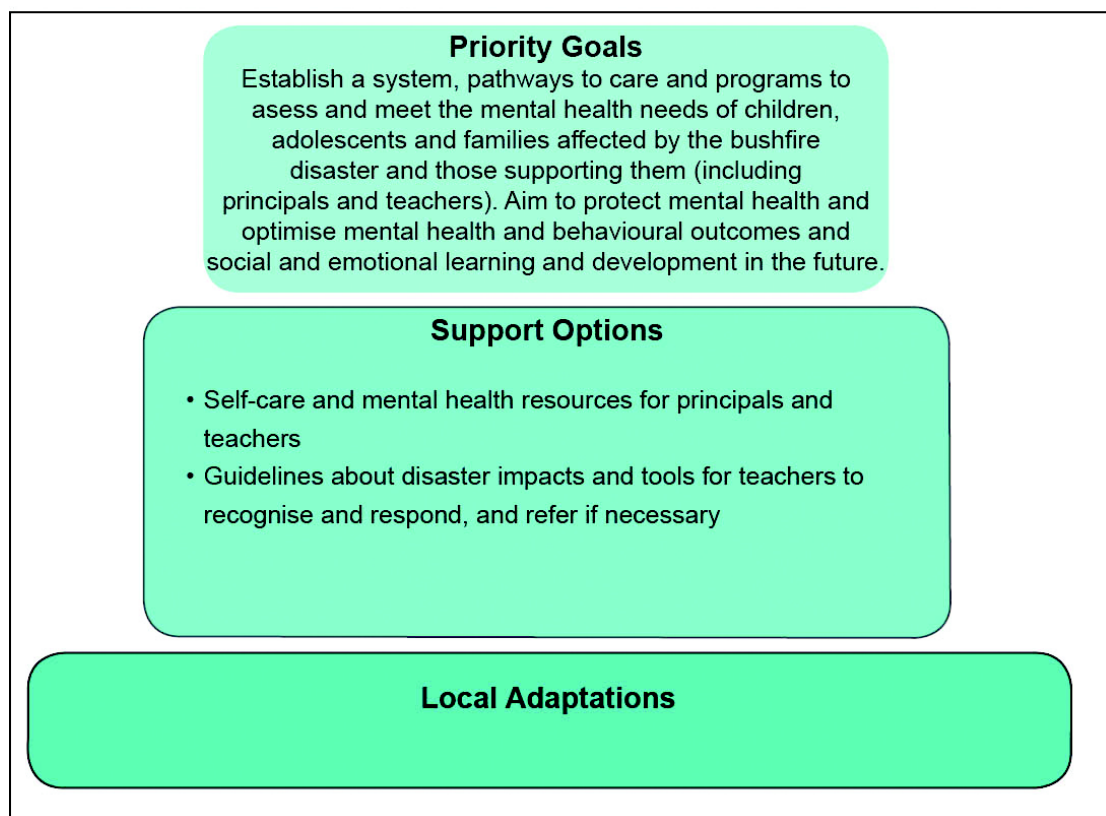


Principals can support teachers and students to 'look after' what has happened through ways such as: the school history of its bushfire experience, memory boxes or resources; memorials regarding losses, sadness and recognition; tributes to and validation of achievement and courage; progress for rebuilding and so forth. These may be produced through creative activities as noted above. They help students and school communities in coming to terms with what has happened, of setting it in context and feeling that they have not 'abandoned' those who were lost, or what was lost in the tragic experiences of the fire.

It is also helpful to acknowledge the complex nature of trauma, loss and catastrophe, the human impacts that occur, and the many different behaviours, feelings, perceptions and understandings that can be generated. It also helps to build organisational (e.g. school community) and individual capacity to recognise, respond to and move through the realities of ongoing and future adversities.

8. *Help when help is needed; care and self-care*

Principals have an important role in modelling self-care. Disasters can have a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of students, their parents and families, teachers, principals and school communities. Accessing systems of mental health assessment and care need to be seen as positive; that to do so reflects courage; and that systems of care and pathways to help must be clearly available and accessible to all who need them, as well as for self care.



Principals and schools have been drivers of, and active partners in major initiatives in the development of mental health-related programs in schools including those about resilience, suicide prevention, recognising depression and dealing with problem behaviours, education on health/mental health and drugs and alcohol, and external linkages. Schools may have programs with capacity for mental health support through school counsellors, support officers with mental health and student welfare goals, or access to specialist psychologist and mental health professionals.

Schools' commitment to student welfare and wellbeing are core educational elements. Similarly there are numerous government, non-government, public health and private sector mental health support services that are available to schools. Welfare and wellbeing under a variety of programs may be basic elements of school programs throughout the developmental stages for pre- to primary to secondary school settings. Whole-school programs such as Mind Matters and Kids Matter are very important contributions, building schools' mental health literacy and competence. Such skills and knowledge are agreed requirements of the school's repertoire of resources and programs.

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Initiatives to prevent, mitigate or manage negative mental health or behavioural outcomes are available. These are provided at a number of levels which will be outlined below. These programs are informed by the best available scientific research and practice, and knowledge of what can be helpful, building on nationally and internationally-recognised expertise, experience and practice. However this is an emerging field and there is the need to evaluate programs and strengthen the evidence base.

An outline is provided of some of the patterns of mental health need and programs/interventions that can help. These should be seen in the context of: particular individual experiences of disaster and the stressors to which people have been exposed; personal vulnerabilities and strengths; ongoing aftermath and stressors resulting from the original disaster or arising anew; the effects of reminders or triggers that evoke the disaster experience; support and protective factors over time; developmental level, family contexts and other influencing variables.

Principals may themselves have experience of the disaster personally or through their school. They may have experienced severe life threat, loss of loved ones, other losses, dislocation and many other adversities associated with a catastrophe such as the bushfires. Self care strategies involve looking after one's general health; and help building resilience and wellbeing. It is useful to recognise that many principals had families threatened in the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria (February 2009) - the duality of roles can make people more vulnerable. Seeking help if significant symptoms arise is an important step, particularly if these are associated with trauma, grief, depression or anxiety, disruption of sleep, concentration and the like. Protecting mental health for the self and others can require one to work only regular 'tours of duty', avoid over-commitment and 'burnout' over the long recovery phase, and to develop a support network of peers which may include other principals who have shared similar experiences.

A peer group of teachers or principals is a very effective strategy for mutual support, building on the value of having been through the disaster together or sharing other common concerns and strengths. Such a group can be informal or phone-centred but is usually better with some regular face-to-face discussions. It can also help to have an outside advisor or mentor, perhaps one with mental health expertise. They can provide information, guidance about when, how or where to get help, and ideas and strategies to deal with students' needs, in class or elsewhere. This support model is useful for day to day management of the distress that students may present with, problems in relation to other emotions and behaviours, or mental health problems and their management and referral. It will also be very useful for the first and second years after the disaster, and possibly beyond.

Teachers are likewise potentially affected by disasters in personal ways; or through their schools and school roles and may suffer significant mental health impacts. One of the few studies which has examined teachers' reactions has shown that they too may develop trauma responses, depression, or other mental health problems as a consequence, and this may significantly impact on their capacity to deal with children's needs, particularly children's reactions to the same disaster. Self care strategies, peer support networks, and access to assessment and treatment, should symptoms of problems arise, are important to support their mental health and well-being. Principals will ensure the schools' systems are attuned to recognising and responding to teachers' needs in supportive ways, so as to mitigate negative outcomes. Mobilising the school's occupational health and employee assistance workers or counsellors may be needed.

Students, i.e. children, adolescents, and their families and communities are frequently directly affected by mass disasters in a range of ways. There are, as with members of the broader community, effects of the acute incident, plus ongoing consequences of the disaster, family responses and new challenges that arise over time. Children and young people respond differently at the various stages of their development, and in relation to their parents' experience or problems, which may add to their vulnerability. Their needs may not be recognised, particularly as they often appear as behavioural changes, which may not be seen by themselves, their parents, or teachers, as in any way related to their disaster experiences.

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There may be little obvious change initially, and withdrawal or acting-out behaviours subsequently. Capacity for concentration and learning are often affected and long term effects have been found, with vulnerability for some. Research studies have shown effects extending into adult life. As indicated previously, life threat – 'I thought I would die', loss, and separation, dislocation, disruption, ongoing stressors and family impacts will influence the likelihood of problems developing, and are relevant at all developmental stages but elicit different response patterns. Many programs to address children's mental health needs in relation to disaster experience are delivered through or in partnership with schools and are tuned to the child's developmental levels.

Key elements of programs for children and adolescents include the following themes:

- Establishing a collaboration with stakeholders to gain their support for an involvement in the programs
- Broad psycho-education about disasters generally, normal reactions at different levels of development and with different experiences; effects for family and reactions over time. These should also deal generally with what can be done for self-help; to build resilience, family support, and when and how to get help.
- Assessing and shaping responses to meet the child's or adolescent's needs, taking into account the specific experience of the disaster and the stresses to which the child has been exposed, particularly those of life threat, loss of parent or family member and other loved ones or friends, loss of house, pet, neighbourhood, school, teacher and so forth; and additional or ongoing stressors
- School programs such as workbooks which are age-appropriate, from colouring books, stories, and resources which, at other levels, can provide some elements of assessment, screening to identify needs, and possibly intervention
- School-based or linked programs delivered in a variety of ways such as by school counsellors or support officers, or other mental health professionals, provided to individuals or groups
- Teachers may play some role but are not expected to operate as mental health professionals, rather as mediators, educators and facilitators
- Three level programs which usually include:
 - Level 1 - basic involving psycho-education as above, and specific skills such as Psychological First Aid (PFA) and Skills for Psychological Recovery (SPR) or elements reflecting these
 - Level 2 - enhanced resources which may include aspects of level 1 above plus strategies such as brief mental health interventions for children or adolescents experiencing ongoing significant reactions, with the goals of accelerating recovery for individuals or groups. This may be provided through school or other settings
 - Level 3 - specific interventions for those with established mental health conditions that require treatment, that have arisen as a result of the disaster experience or been exacerbated by it. These programs have also been delivered by schools in some instances. They deal with trauma disorders (PTSD), traumatic grief, depression or other disorders.

The focus for treatment is usually counselling. This addresses trauma, grief and other adversities, triggers and reminders as well as providing information and supporting developmental progression.

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- Individual counselling programs are available using trauma-focused CBT models
- Web-based programs are available for children and adolescents with some traumatic experiences, but have not yet been delivered for disaster-affected children
- Assessing and meeting the needs of parents and other family members may be an important component of managing the child's problems
- Information for teachers, parents, students and others about when, how and where to get help and self care strategies is another component.

Any response to meet children's needs has to be sanctioned by them and their parents and must follow the requirements for benefit, not doing harm, and protecting the child.

A key responsibility for principals and schools is to provide clear processes and pathways for care, in partnership with the parents of the children and those who provide access and systems of care. The establishment of a **collaborative system and program** with agencies such as the school community; general practitioners; local mental health services (e.g. Child and Adolescent Mental Health) is essential for clear pathways to care and for choice.

Access that continues over time is critically important. This is more so if there is not such a program already in place. As the mental health needs of children and adolescents are likely to emerge progressively over the months and years, this needs to become a trusted resource, advising and consulting to the school on general mental health matters, creating positive pathways and choices, evaluating effectiveness and building a resource that is very valuable for these mental health needs and more broadly for the future.

9. Emerging challenges

The aftermath of the bushfires continues to provide challenges for school communities. Challenges that are ongoing include displacement, crowded living conditions, emotional responses and unrealistic recovery expectations. Family stressors post bushfires add another challenge.

Challenges in the long aftermath may include emergence of family difficulties and conflict, even family breakdown; crowded living conditions, delays in establishing one's own home or place again; and lack of understanding from others who may have expectations that it should all be 'right' or 'fixed' or that one should be 'over it by now'. Self-expectations may contribute. Significant problems also emerge over the prolonged post-disaster period, and contribute 'new' challenges. 'Keeping on' and 'getting through' such issues reinforces competency, self-efficacy, the sense of strength, mastery and capacity to find the way forward.