



Catholic Education Office
Archdiocese of Melbourne

In reply please quote:

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Statement for the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Organisations

Madam Chair

I congratulate the Victorian Government and the Family and Community Development Committee for taking the national lead on this important discussion.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to appear before the Committee today.

I am also pleased that the Australian Government has broadened the focus of its Royal Commission to look at all institutional responses to child sexual abuse, so that our children can be protected from this evil.

Because, as we all know, these shocking and vile crimes are a national disgrace that were not confined to religious organisations but have been a blight across all levels of society.

I began as a youth worker in 1975.

I graduated as a teacher in 1980.

I was Director of Community Services for a Local Council.

I was a member of the Victorian Parliament for 11 years

And the Parliamentary Secretary for Education for seven years.

I have been the Executive Director of Catholic Education for the past seven years.

My life's work and professional duty has been dedicated to the education and development of Victoria's young people.

I have witnessed immense change in the child protection landscape since I embarked on my career in education some 38 years ago.

We live in a very different world today than when I first began in education. Back then certain figures in society carried unquestioned authority, like teachers, police and indeed religious figures.

A socio-cultural shift has occurred and these figures are now being held to account for their actions and ethical standards.

But this cultural shift has also been matched by a dramatic strengthening of the legislative framework, so that our children are protected by the law.

I am proud of the work that I have done – as a legislator and as an educationalist – to influence these legislative requirements.

But the insidious and devious nature of paedophilia means that we all must continually examine and strengthen the safeguards for the protection of our children.

This Inquiry and the Royal Commission are clearly integral to this.

As the Executive Director of Catholic Education I can say to the families of the more than 200,000 young people in our care – your children are as safe in a Catholic school as they are in any other school.

And I take this commitment as seriously as I have the safety of my own two children.

I can say this confidently because all schools in Victoria operate under common regulatory requirements in this area. All the same – Government, Catholic and Independent.

The legislative framework that applies to all Victorian schools to ensure the protection of children comprises:

- the Children, Youth & Families Act 2005 (CYFA)
 - *Section 182 details Mandatory Reporting requirements*
- the Education & Training Reform Act 2006
- the Education & Training Reform Regulations 2007
- the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006
- the Working With Children Check Act (2005).

In addition, there are regulatory and policy requirements, including:

- the Victorian Institute of Teaching (established in 2001)
- the Victorian Registration & Qualifications Authority requirements (2012)
- a Joint Government / Education Protocol: *Protecting the Safety & Wellbeing of Children & Young People* (updated in May 2010) to which the CECV is a signatory
- the COAG National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (2009).

Mandatory reporting legislation was first introduced in Victoria in 1994.

Any person who is a registered teacher with the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT), including principals, is mandated to report to the Department of Human Services Child Protection if they form a 'reasonable belief' that a child is in need of protection from physical injury or sexual abuse, and the child's parents are unable or unwilling to protect the child.

Staff members in all schools (mandated or not) need to report a 'reasonable belief' when this belief is formed in the course of their professional duties.

Mandatory reporting requires the individual staff member to immediately refer the matter to the Child Protection. Additionally, our internal policies involve clear procedures for referral to Victoria Police.

Once the matter has been reported to Child Protection, an appropriate investigation of the complaint is conducted by Child Protection and Victoria Police as appropriate.

In addition to mandatory reporting requirements, all teachers must be registered with the VIT.

If there is a substantiated allegation of serious misconduct against a teacher or principal in a Catholic school, the employer is obliged to notify the VIT of any action taken against the teacher. The VIT then conducts its own investigation into the matter, which may lead to disciplinary action by the VIT, including possible de-registration. Any member of the public can also refer complaints about teachers or principals in Catholic schools to the VIT.

This advice is provided to schools and is publicly available on the Catholic Education Office Melbourne website under Policy 2.20.

The CEOM conducts annual training on mandatory reporting procedures for all staff in Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

Finally, the joint Protocol (*Protecting the Safety & Wellbeing of Children*) between Child Protection and all Victorian schools has been in place since 2001 to facilitate effective responses to protect children from harm.

This protocol was updated in May 2010 and has been updated online to include national legislation updates.

The requirements for Catholic education in Victoria in relation to Working With Children Checks go beyond the minimum requirements of the relevant legislation. For example, all non-teaching staff and volunteers in Catholic schools are required by our protocol to have a Working With Children Check.

But this is about more than laws. There are more children in Catholic education now than ever before in the history of this state and our enrolments are growing at unprecedented rates, with Catholic schools currently attracting more than 50 per cent of all new enrolments.

Principals in our schools, their staff and I are proud of our vibrant Catholic schools, which hold themselves to the highest ethical, academic and professional standards.

But more importantly Victorian parents continue to trust Catholic schools to provide a safe environment in which to educate their children. They recognise that the structures, checks and balances in place today reflect the latest legal and community expectations.

Recent research on parental attitudes toward schools found that parents highly value the pastoral care of Catholic schools and believe Catholic schools are ahead of the other sectors in this area in their care for the wellbeing of students.

This is very important to me because our community is indebted to our Parish Priests, principals, teachers and staff and members of religious congregations. They have contributed to the legacy of Catholic education and have helped develop generations of fine young people who are now shaping the world for our common good.

I would also like to take this opportunity to recognise the many wonderful priests and religious who have dedicated their lives to assist the education of our young people and to serve the community in which they work. They have been affected very deeply by the crimes that are the subject of your Inquiry and are also determined to see this blight removed from the Church.

The vibrancy of Catholic education says to me that the life's work of these educators has not been undermined by these evil crimes.

Most importantly I publicly state my shame, anger and sorrow that children in our Catholic schools have been abused.

Any attempt to minimise the severe damage that has been done in the past, to innocent children, is abhorrent to us.

I hope that I am right in my belief that society no longer holds an unquestioning trust in those in positions of authority, that culturally it is more difficult for these devious crimes to go undetected, and that our children are safer through legal protections.

I hope this process will show that lessons have been learnt for the betterment of the whole community.

It is our firm pledge to assist, as much as is possible, anyone hurt in the past.

The great opportunity for this Parliamentary Inquiry is for the Church's failings to be a lightning rod: to expose the great evil of child abuse and child sexual abuse and continually improve the protection of all children.

I am especially convinced that the wisdom and experience of parents are indispensable for the protection and nurturing of all of our children. Our capacity to respond has been bolstered by the insights shared with us by parents.

I hope that the deliberations and recommendations of this Inquiry further enhance and strengthen the safety and welfare of children.