

SPECIAL MEETING in relation to CHILD ABUSE CASE.

Venue: Catholic Education Office, Toowoomba.

Date: 23rd February, 2009.

Present:

Bishop William Morris, DD, Bishop of Diocese of Toowoomba. John Borserio, Director, Catholic Education Office, Toowoomba, Father Peter Dorfield, Vicar General, Mike Byrne, Executive Director, Queensland Catholic Education Commission, Margaret Battle, Principal, St Saviour's College, Robyn Sharpe, Principal, St Thomas More's Primary School, Barry Sheehan, Director Centacare, John Davis, Consultant Support, Gerard Delaney, Media Officer, QCEC, Margaret Hendriks, Assistant Director: Staff and School Development, (minute taker), Sr Angela Ryan and Phil Mulhall, (National Committee for Professional Standards via telephone).

Prayer: John opened the meeting with a prayer – "The Spirit to Know You".

Agenda: John also handed out an agenda and introduced participants at the meeting. Sr Sue Flood had been invited but was an apology for today.

John explained the reason for the meeting. We gathered because of the child abuse incident at one of our local Catholic primary schools. John read from a script which he had developed to give an overview of what had occurred and what were the circumstances of the case as he knew them. The Catholic Education Office has complied with the legal imperative not to conduct our own investigation. Reference was made to media articles and to advice which had been given to the Principal to 'stand down'. The Non State School Accreditation Board had responded to media articles by requesting information. A response has been sent to the N\$SAB – Thynne and Macartney have worked on this response. Once the legal process permits, Thynne and Macartney will conduct an internal investigation.

Once the Police investigation against the accused is completed then it is expected that another one will follow.

Mike Byrne mentioned that the Minister for Education had said that an inquiry could take place into a possible breach of the legislation.

Thynne and Macartney had been working with our office since late last year. The school Principal had been stood down on their advice on 6th February, 2009. The media had shown a lot of interest in the matter and this has upset the school community. There is a group of dissidents who are working in opposition to the majority of the community. Communication had been sent to the parents and staff twice. A prepared media release had been forwarded to the whole Diocese and the Priests. Our stance is that we wish to cooperate fully and openly. The Police had commented anecdotally that parents generally seemed comfortable with the investigation so far.

Briefings had also occurred with the Catholic Education Board, staff, primary and secondary Principals, and the Council of Priests. John and Bishop had met with CCI today as well.

Why are we meeting? It was thought that a group of people who had wisdom in their own professional fields could provide some guidance to us in how we are managing this issue and how we continue to manage it.

Acknowledgement was made of the work that Gerard Delaney and Mike Byrne had already done for us. On Wednesday, this week, John would be meeting with Rowlands, a PR firm from Brisbane.

Phil asked whether a decision had been made not to include the legal firm in today's meeting? The answer was that there was no conscious decision to exclude them as they have been working with the office since late last year.

John mentioned that the case comes to the magistrate's court in Toowoomba on Thursday, 26th February. While it was thought that the accused person would plead guilty, there was no certainty of it. There were unknowns in relation to Thursday – plea, sentencing, media response.

Mike asked what we would do if a plea was entered? John acknowledged that we need to consider media responses, responses for staff and parents on Thursday.

Various suggestions were then put forward by participants:

Letter to parents to be posted not sent home with children

Statement on the website (generic) with a personal letter to each parent as well.

School Newsletter goes out on Thursdays – an alert to be placed in the newsletter to advise that a letter would be posted to each family.

Advice to all school communities in the diocese that information would be posted to school and office websites.

Statement to media – local media, TV, radio.

Key messages need to be established: recognize pain and suffering, compassion, support and sorrow.

Clarification around the issue of whether the accused person will be named or not on Thursday was important because we needed to develop a couple of different media responses depending on whether this occurred or not. All staff need to have a defined answer to media information of 2007 reports: We cannot investigate this until the Police process is complete. Following the Police investigations we would be happy to look into this matter. We need to have a sentence that everyone commits to.

John commented that this case had two facets that were important: current allegations against a teacher and the media articles of report/s in 2007. When questions are posed about 2007 we need to have deflecting statements – the critical issue is the families which are suffering. There may be a need to rehearse this statement.

What has been the level of pastoral support offered? Father Peter commented that about 6 or 7 families out of 13 have self identified. Each parent has been offered personal support as have others.

Sr Angela mentioned that in Adelaide a letter had been written to parents and passed to them through the Police. Fr Peter said that the local Police had made sure that people who had not identified to others could access support. Counselling had been offered through the school community, Centacare and independent counselors. John said that names and reports are on record and available. In fact some of the dissident parents had them.

Barry thought that 3 families had approached Centacare and possibly 3 others had availed of other counselors.

It was possible that others who were not immediately connected with the issue could need to access counseling in future. Others who were not directly connected with the allegations could be effected through being connected with the school and might need to come forward for support in the future.

Mike then asked what needed to be done for Friday, 27th February. After discussion, it was decided that the school should try to keep the program as normal as possible. It was thought best to keep Wednesday as Ash Wednesday and Friday should be the usual school program so that the students are comforted by routine.

The Senior Education Officer for the school, John Coman, will be present at the school on Thursday, 26th February. A relief teacher could be available in case staff need to step out of class. (After the meeting, a school counselor has agreed to be present at the magistrate's court and the counselor who works with the school will be at the school on Friday if required.)

It was acknowledged that the wife of the school Principal is a teacher on the staff. There are also staff members at the primary and secondary school who are parents.

Fr Peter mentioned that the P & F meeting held recently was positive. All those parents present (approx 100) were well informed, as far as it was possible to do so. Questions were tabled and answered directly and personally by the Director. He felt that any questions that people could have were shared at the meeting.

Mike asked if there was another big group meeting planned.

John felt that the focus should now move to helping parents be better informed. He spoke about the school creating a special parent section which could include books and materials on student protection as well as a range of other materials of interest.

Bishop Bill also referred to the Resource Centre which is open to the public and because of this could be a good avenue for parents to gain information. It seems to be a way to move forward.

Angela referred to a document she had written a few years ago for Child Protection Week. She mentioned that there could be other children who have not disclosed and some of these children could have been in other schools.

Mike said that if the accused person is not named then we need to ask the Police how we communicate to other schools in the state where this person has worked. We would need to contact the Principals of those schools and consider media statement about this too.

Angela's advice was to work with our local Police. We need to keep records of conversations, questions, and answers. We can say to the media that we are working with the Police.

Mike posed the question: How can this happen over a long period and no one knew?

Barry's response was that perpetrators are skilled.

Angela's response was: This question is subject to enquiry. We are following up on it but it is part of ongoing follow up. Be definite. To the parent questions about why some children don't disclose, Angela commented that different people deal with these matters in different ways. Sometimes, people take a long time to come forward.

John mentioned that for legal advice we had been working with Thynne and Macartney since 4/5 December, 2008. This firm had also given advice about media responses. CCI too have been involved.

Were there other people who should be accessing?

Barry mentioned Justine Garvey from Brisbane Catholic Education Centre who provides advice to the professional standards group and that she was very good.

Angela commented that we need to keep working closely with our local Police and that Barry will keep Rowena MacNally informed. Merita who works with CCI is also very good for legal advice.

Mike then gave the meeting information in relation to the Non State Schools Accreditation Board involvement. This Board accredits our schools and if inappropriate matters occur then the Board can inquire into whether the 'governing body' of the school has acted properly. The document that Thynne and Macartney had prepared on behalf of the Bishop (who is the 'governing body' in our Diocese) was very good.

John mentioned resourcing that had been offered:

Counselling, extra staffing to relieve teachers, a staff reflection day, parent resourcing, John Davis has been engaged to provide extra support to the Director. Bishop Bill suggested that the Resource Centre could provide some extra materials for information.

Barry referred to a new staff member who has come from the Child Protection background Jeannie.....? He wondered if Jeannie might offer some ideas as well. Bishop Bill asked if Jeannie could perhaps join the Diocesan Professional Standards group.

Margaret Battle wondered if ongoing material for parents could be provided under the topic of 'care' to give a positive rather than a negative impact. John mentioned that the Protective Behaviours information sheet for parents is being put on the web site.

Angela said that balance was needed as it was not helpful to keep throwing some of this material in people's faces if they were directly affected. We should also put some of this material within the context of good physical health, weight etc. Angela volunteered both herself and Phil as resource people from outside of the diocese who have a lot of experience and could be available for a later meeting with parents? Mike added that this could be a good strategy for the dissident group.

It was also commented that Sharon MaCallum (Townsville) was very good in the area as well.

Gerard questioned what we should do if the accused person is named. The answer was to ask the Police for advice. Maybe a phone number could be made available for anyone who wanted to report disclosures. Angela said that other offenders may also be named if there is a phone number made available but it was agreed that if people wanted to disclose then we would deal with that.

Barry asked what had been the dissident level of activity? John recounted the meetings and faxes, letters that had been sent. Contact had been made with a male teacher on the staff to try to encourage his involvement with their group, pressuring the School Board and P & F, confronting parents at school pick up time, and visit to the Queensland College of Teachers.

There was urgency in getting all the tasks completed by Thursday.

Phil asked about what had been prepared for staff on Thursday – Senior Education Officer (John Coman) to visit and inform staff once the matter was completed at court. Ian Hunter, another Senior Education Officer, will be at the magistrates court on Thursday morning. Fr Ray Crowley to be available and a school counselor also.

John (Davis) asked if the dissident group was likely to be present. It was thought so. Margaret (Battle) thought it important that the staff had the correct language to use following the outcome of the court matter. On Friday there would need to be support for staff and school, children and maybe Principal. The school routine should be as normal as possible.

Barry mentioned that counseling needs to be offered at the appropriate time. It was mentioned that the current (Acting) Principal thought that the school children were fine and that those who were repeating information tended to be saying what their parents thought. The school community was functioning fairly normally.

Angela's advice was not to build it up but to handle it intuitively.

Fr Peter mentioned that the accused person has family around Toowoomba with involvement in various parishes.

Gerard advised writing to all families in the diocese, co-signed by the Director and the Bishop. Principals could then send out letters to their school families through the post to home addresses. The Senior Education Officers could phone their schools and advise Principals from a prepared script following Thursday.

Were the Priests of the diocese informed? Fr Peter referred to 2 occasions when this had happened.

It was explained that school photos were to occur this week and the question had been asked about what to do in relation to the Principal who is 'stood down'. The answer was to reschedule the photos for later in the year. Margaret Battle said that her school photos were later and thus there would be an opportunity to photograph the staff at that time.

Meeting closed after 3.00pm with thanks to all concerned for their efforts in providing wisdom and advice at this difficult time.

Margaret Hendriks – minute taker.