

## Child Abuse Reference Team:

Meeting #2

16 March 2009

### Present:

John Borserio	Director
Neil Rickelman	Rowland
Emma Lawlor	Rowland
Sr Sue Flood	Social Justice Commission
Gerard Delaney	QCEC: Communication Officer
Barry Sheehan	Centacare
Robyn Sharpe	Principal – St Thomas More's Primary School (from 12.45pm)
Fr Peter Dorfield	Vicar General (from 1.00pm)

Via teleconference: Sr Angela Ryan, Phil Mulhall, (National Committee for Professional Standards).

John Davis           Assisting the Director in this matter

Margaret Hendriks   Minutes secretary

### Apologies:

Bishop William Morris, Mike Byrne (QCEC), Margaret Battle (Principal, St Saviour's College).

Meeting commenced at 12.35 pm.

The Director opened the meeting by welcoming everyone and introducing Neil and Emma who had not been at the last meeting. The agenda was distributed (previously faxed to Angela).

Following the numbering of the agenda matters discussed were as follows:

### 3. Updates since February, 23<sup>rd</sup>.

\*Minutes of Meeting 1 were completed and forwarded to all members.

\*Rowland were engaged to provide communication support .

\*23 February, Thynne and Macartney were advised that the Qld Police Service had commenced their investigation re: possible failure of Principal in relation to the alleged non-reporting to police of suspected sexual assault allegations and to also examine the procedures currently in place for the when dealing with such allegations.

\*School counselors had developed a Protective Behaviours Information Flyer which was sent to all schools and placed on school websites.

\*On 25<sup>th</sup> February, Neil, Gerard and Emma helped with response to the matter going to the magistrates' court. No plea was entered. (A plea will probably happen at the District Court.) The next 'mention' will be March 25<sup>th</sup>.

\*On 26<sup>th</sup> February, some communication strategies were actioned – letters were sent to parents and carers at the primary school and others listed on the Communication List attached to the agenda.

\*4<sup>th</sup> March, NSSAB broadened extent of their questions to include any complaints against staff of the school from 2001 to 2008.

\*5<sup>th</sup> March – reference in local paper to Police investigation of claims of inaction.

9<sup>th</sup> March – Children's Commission inquiry into 3 complaints received. Thynne and Macartney responded to the third complaint. (The Director was able to reply to the first two.)

\*Communication with the Principal of the school has been arranged. A CEO staff member will maintain contact.

#### 4. Action sheet –

Present at Court were Senior Education Officer, Fr R Crowley and a counselor and a Senior Education Officer was present at the school to brief the staff.. An email providing information was sent to all Principals.

Gerard asked whether there was any reason given for the second set of questions from the NSSAB.

John B commented that he could not provide answers to some of the questions because we have not been able to conduct any investigation ourselves. A copy of the letter from the Qld Police Service advising that we should hold off our own investigation until their process had been completed was forwarded to the NSSAB.

Some discussion occurred in relation to the plea process and whether the plea goes to the District Court. Would the accused person be present? Are the angry people still making contact? John explained that the angry group of people had met with himself and the Bishop and letters had also been forwarded to them. John now wants to maintain contact with the wider group of parents who are entitled to information – not just the people who complain.

John also explained his contact with the Children's Commission and the questions/complaints they were handling. The third question revolved around the issue of whether or not the Director was the best person to answer questions from disaffected parents.

Action Report – Neil and Gerard had worked on generic statements for the web site. Neil and Emma expressed their awareness of the sensitivity of this issue and their appreciation of the need for this when working on these types of issues. Neil and Gerard had worked with John B in preparation for the last court mention in case option 1 or 2 occurred but instead option 3 was the reality!

Neil explained that there were 3 foundation principles in this communication process:

- the issue had to be all about substance and not 'spin'
- preparation was very important
- responsiveness: the expectation from stakeholders that answers were needed immediately

He went on to mention key milestones such as (1) person appearing at magistrate's court (2) investigation by the QPS, (3) NSSAB review, (4) involvement of Children's Commission.

The media tend to see these events as a story. The key event for us is the QPS investigation. The outcome/s of this will be important for the Principal and the CEO – behaviours and actions will be highlighted.

It should be noted that more senior staff within the QPS are maintaining an interest in this matter. Michael McKenna the Australian journalist has ensured that the matter has national interest.

March 25<sup>th</sup>: What scenarios should we be preparing for? 1. Person pleads guilty or 2. Defence solicitors ask for more time or 3. A 'not guilty' plea is entered?

QPS investigation: Principal and two Senior Education Officers – could all parties be charged? What could be implications for the Bishop? He has not been listed as a 'person of interest'. Professional negligence, other staff at the school??

NSSAB review: Some of these agencies such as the NSSAB, Children's Commission, etc are asking the same questions. Eg What did the Principal know? When did he know it? Did we change our processes? Have we conducted professional development for Principals? Annual audit – what is involved?

What is the worst case scenario? Could accreditation for the school be removed? The CEO may be asked to conduct an external audit of processes. There may be disconnection between processes and procedures and the way in which they were followed.

Sr Sue asked about the cross over between all these agencies and the Qld College of Teachers. Could this impact on the registration of teachers involved if staff are convicted of failure to report?

The Minister for Education may wish to make a statement. Is it possible to find out what possible action the NSSAB can or could take? The Children's Commission too?

Gerard asked about how the Department of Child Safety, the NSSAB and the Qld Police Service all connected and overlap.

As Neil pointed out there are a number of entities involved and it is confusing and also a concern as to what could possibly eventuate from each.

Sr Angela suggested that it may be possible to advise each entity that other groups have already requested information. Perhaps this might help to coordinate the same information going to different groups of people.

The 'ripple effect' across a number of individuals and groups was discussed and illustrated. This matter is also raising the number of reports coming in from schools. Personnel are nervous and thus making more reports than is usual.

What kind of media interest can we expect? If the accused person pleads guilty there would be media interest. We have to say there is an investigation. The Courier Mail has not shown interest so far but could if the accused person pleads guilty. We need to say that the investigation continues and that our thoughts and prayers are with those involved. We need to show empathy, to distance ourselves from the court case (it is outside our control), and we need to reinforce our desire to cooperate with the QPS. We show respect for the legal process.

Police investigation:

If staff are charged they are stood down – Sr Angela suggested we use the term, 'stood aside'. If the Principal has made a mistake in this what happens? We were reminded that the Principal and others are not the 'abusers'. The Director can look at what they could do –perhaps a different role.

Communication:

Neil will provide support for potential scenarios. Should Bishop Bill be one of the people to speak on this matter if required? Is it a role for the Director? The Bishop does have a role and much experience at a national level in these matters. There is a role for the Bishop in answering media questions if appropriate. This could be very important later on – perhaps in relation to senior people.

If the QPS says that there is insufficient evidence to support charges, what do we then do? If people concerned are exonerated how do we call the dissenting group to account? What happens to those who have exploited the 'doubt' that has been expressed in the Principal's actions?

Neil commented that we needed to get a handle on how things are progressing. HMB Lawyers asked the QPS today about progress of the investigation. If it is completed at the end of March what happens then?

How do we find out about any further charges? If information is tabled in court how do we obtain copies?

Neil asked if Mike Byrne could ask the NSSAB about their processes and possible outcomes. We need to be proactive with our parent group but reactive with the media. We keep putting out the key messages for stakeholders. This task is not yet completed because of the need to meet first today.

John asked for any additional people to add to the Communication List.

Neil suggested that John ask about what will happen after 31<sup>st</sup> March. Where does the report go? What happens then? At the next meeting of this group we should include the legal people who could give us answers to these questions.

Sr Angela asked if the Principal gets every communication that goes to parents. John said that he had not to date but would include this in the communication process with the stood aside principal. John had contacted the Principal on February 25<sup>th</sup> to arrange a contact person.

After the next court process we react to media but do not seek out comment. John is to advise parents of the next developments and achievements. If the QPS investigation says that we have a case to answer we admit fault and commit to on-going work to achieve safety for children in our schools.

Sr Sue enquired about support to the accused person's family. Fr Peter was able to give details of the circle of care that surrounds the family and to the accused person's nearest relatives. John mentioned the counseling support which is offered to all families involved. Fr Peter commented on the pressure that is on the Principal and his family.

The meeting closed at 2.45pm with another date to meet to be arranged as necessary.

M. Hendriks, Minute Secretary.