

THE AUSTRALIAN THURSDAY FEBRUARY 5 2009

Probe into failure on abuse

Michael McKenna

AN investigation has been launched into the possible failure of a Toowoomba primary school and Catholic Education to act on complaints of sexual abuse by a teacher more than a year before he was arrested for the rape and molestation of 13 girls.

Queensland Education Minister Rod Welford yesterday ordered the investigation after *The Weekend Australian* reported on Saturday that a police statement tendered in the Supreme Court revealed that a nine-year-old student had complained of "touching" by the veteran teacher, who also served as the school's child protection officer, before many of the young victims were allegedly abused.

The primary school could be fined or lose its accreditation under state laws requiring the mandatory reporting to police of any suspicions of sexual abuse by a staff member.

Mr Welford said he had ordered the Government's Non-

State Schools Accreditation Board to conduct an urgent investigation into the actions of Catholic Education and the school, which cannot be named for legal reasons.

"Where children are concerned, we can't be too careful with their safety," Mr Welford said. "I have asked for urgent advice on this issue, and if further action needs to be taken, I won't hesitate to do so."

The investigation was launched as parents of children at the school continued to call for the suspension of the principal as well as local Catholic Education head John Borserio.

Mr Borserio confirmed last week that parents of a nine-year-old student had met the principal in September 2007.

Mr Borserio said he would not detail the complaint because of privacy reasons but he confirmed that the police had not been called, although he said "action had been taken".

Police statements tendered to the court for the teacher's un-

successful bail application show the child told investigators she had complained of the teacher's "touching" to the principal.

It is alleged that, after the complaint, he was kept on at the school, where he raped and molested 12 other young girls, often "in view of all of his students".

"The complainant child states about a week after telling her principal, the defendant started to touch her again for a week," police reported in a brief tendered to the court. It is understood the parents took their child out of the school soon afterwards, and moved out of Toowoomba.

The teacher, 60, who has allegedly confessed to abusing at least six of the girls, was arrested on November 14 after another student made allegations of abuse directly to the police.

Mr Borserio was unavailable for interview yesterday.

He later released a statement saying his office would cooperate with the investigation.