



Weekend Australian
Saturday 31/1/2009
Page: 7
Section: General News
Region: Australia Circulation: 307,000
Type: National
Size: 351.70 sq.cms.

Brief: EQ_MIN
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School inaction 'protected alleged abuser'

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THE nightmare should have ended when the little girl, just nine years old, spilled her secret to the school principal.

After enduring months of alleged abuse by her Year Four teacher — the defendant in a child sex case involving 46 charges and 13 allegedly abused girls — she found the courage to fight back.

Her teacher, a well-liked, genial, 60-year-old veteran of the Catholic education system, was the school's child protection officer: the adult all the kids were told to confide in if there was even a hint of improper behaviour at the well-heeled Catholic primary school in Toowoomba.

In the third term of 2007, the girl told her parents and then the school principal of the "touching" that, on one occasion, she later alleged in a police statement, drew laughs from "some of the boys in her class".

The parents, who took her out of the school and moved away soon after the complaint, are understood to have been assured that action would be taken. But it appears nothing was done.

The Weekend Australian can find no evidence that the school or the Catholic diocese called outside authorities over the young girl's complaint to the principal.

Outraged parents suspect a continuation of the cover-up mentality of church institutions from decades ago, despite laws dictating the mandatory reporting of any suspicions of abuse at schools to the police.

The children allegedly paid for it with their innocence.

"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 obtained by *The Weekend Australian*.

Over the next year, at least 12 other girls, some who naively tried at times to disguise themselves to avoid the teacher's attention, allegedly suffered an onslaught of abuse. This involved vaginal and anal digital penetration and oral sex, as they were each called to the teacher's desk or held back after class.

It came to light only when

another girl went directly to police with her allegations of abuse, 14 months after the first girl made her complaint to the school.

Director of Catholic Education for the Toowoomba diocese John Borserio yesterday confirmed the meeting between the school's principal and the parents of the first girl in September 2007.

Mr Borserio said privacy laws prevented him from detailing the discussions. "Actions were taken following that meeting between those parents and the principal," he said.

Mr Borserio declined to reveal what was done, confirming only that police were not told.

Again, he cited privacy laws as to why the complaint did not go outside the diocese.

After the complaint, the teacher, a father who police allege confessed to abusing some of the girls, remained at the school.

He finished the 2007 year and then suddenly retired in the middle of last year, leaving with a gift, glowing testimonials and a farewell mass.

The reason for his departure, he later explained, was that he could not bear to defend himself against a separate allegation of verbal intimidation by the parent of a student.

Weeks later, he was re-hired as a relief teacher, taking Year Four and Year Five classes until his arrest on November 14. The arrest followed the complaint made to police by the second girl, 10, of her abuse, and that of several of her friends.

It is understood she made the complaint after a Queensland Government sex education unit had visited the school.

The teacher, who cannot be named, was immediately interviewed and, according to police, made admissions on tape to the abuse of the child and five other girls. Since then, other children have come forward with allegations and he is facing 46 charges, involving 13 girls, including multiple counts of rape and indecent treatment of a child.

Police suspect more victims will come forward when his identity is eventually revealed in court.

"It is unknown how many other complainant children there are in the community as the defendant has had a long ... teaching career," police said in a statement, tendered to the Queensland Supreme Court to oppose his unsuccessful bid for bail last month.

Some parents have voiced their concern that the diocese has not been open enough with the school community about the arrest to encourage other possible victims to come forward. Mr Borserio said three small group meetings with parents were held, and that they were alerted by way of an insert in the school newsletter.

He conceded there was no specific mention of the arrest of the school teacher for the offences in the newsletter.

"I think people were aware of what was going on because of the publicity surrounding the arrest," he said.

In line with child sex cases, the media have been prevented from naming the teacher or the school, other than to state it was a Catholic primary school in Toowoomba. The case against the man, who is in protective custody, is still at the magistrate's level.

Police allege the teacher, who originally trained as a Christian brother but did not take vows, was brazen with his abuse.

"He has committed almost all these offences during class time at his desk, which is situated at the front of the class in view of all his students," police told the bail hearing.

They allege he used his position as the school's child protection officer to manipulate the children into not reporting the abuse.

"The defendant has utilised guilt over the complainant children, allowing them to think that if they told anyone, he would get into trouble for what he had done to them," police alleged.

Police say he would apologise to one alleged victim and the next day move on to another student. Some of the children were allegedly unable to say how many times they were abused.

The teacher has no criminal record and according to a psychiatrist's report, denies being a child abuse victim himself.