

28 March 2013

Ms Georgie Crozier, MP
Chair, Family and Community Development Committee
Parliament of Victoria
Parliament House
Spring Street
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Dear Ms Crozier

Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to outline the processes we have in place to respond to complaints of actual or potential abuse of children in our Member Schools. With more than 130,000 students in our 200-plus schools the number of complaints is relatively low but because this is an important social issue we welcome the Family and Community Development Committee's inquiry.

Background

Established in 1949, Independent Schools Victoria represents and provides services to Independent schools in Victoria. More than 99 per cent of all students enrolled in the Victorian Independent sector attend a Member School.

Independent Schools Victoria celebrates and promotes the diversity of its Member Schools, choice in education and the contribution that Member Schools make to their communities. Our activities are based on shared values and embrace a commitment to quality outcomes for Victorian students.

Our members are diverse, serving different communities. They provide religious or values-based education or teach particular education philosophies.

Independent Schools Victoria is not a system authority managing schools, but a membership organisation providing professional services to inform schools and raise quality standards. We speak to governments and the community on behalf of our membership.

Independent Schools Victoria contributes to education policy development based on research and sound evidence. We have initiated innovative approaches to educational reform, piloting and implementing significant projects. As a result we are recognised for our contribution to state, national and international educational thinking and practice.

Vision

The vision of Independent Schools Victoria is for a strong Independent education sector demonstrating best practice, providing excellent outcomes for students and choice for families.

To realise this, we:

- advocate for excellence in education
- champion Member Schools
- support quality education
- protect the right of parents to choose where and how their children are educated.

Independent Schools Victoria assists our membership to continue providing the best possible education outcomes for the citizens of tomorrow.

Our core activities are to:

- promote the principle of choice in education
- champion the values of Independent schools
- promote the development and protect the autonomy of Member Schools
- work with the Australian and Victorian Governments to achieve more equitable, choice-orientated and efficient means of funding students' learning
- contribute to the development, implementation and evaluation of education policies to achieve quality outcomes.

Safety and welfare of students

The Chief Executive of Independent Schools Victoria is a signatory to *Protecting the safety and wellbeing of children and young people* – a joint protocol of the Department of Human Services (DHS) Child Protection, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), Licensed Children's Services and Victorian schools¹.

The protocol was signed in 2010 to ensure a unified and consistent approach that defines roles and responsibilities to protect the safety and wellbeing of all Victorian children and young people.

Our Member Schools subscribe to the protocol's tenet that every child has the right to a full and productive life, growing up in environments that build confidence, friendship, security and happiness, irrespective of a person's family circumstances or background. We know that child abuse infringes this right.

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Member Schools are advised that child abuse:

- is an act by parents or caregivers that endangers a child or young person's physical or emotional health or development
- can be a single incident, but usually takes place over time
- includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse or neglect.

Processes and personnel

Our association does not impose conditional standards on our members because they are independently-managed schools. However we have put in place processes and personnel to advise schools because we know that the safety and welfare of students is their paramount concern.

To ensure that we are able to respond promptly and fully to inquiries from schools we have two Directors and two senior managers to be available to take phone calls or respond to emails or letters. A member of the team is available after hours.

The team is also proactive, visiting schools to brief staff on mandatory reporting and the importance of observing the Victorian Institute of Teaching codes of conduct and the responsibilities of teachers in relation to their duty of care. This is also a topic that is included in seminars offered by Independent Schools Victoria.

Mandated reporting

Independent Schools Victoria advises Member Schools that one of the minimum standards for school registration is that the school has a mandatory reporting policy and set of procedures. We inform Principals and staff of the circumstances under which mandated reporting is required and provide specific details of how, when and what a mandated notifier should report.

If a Principal considers that there might be a problem, one of the Directors or managers provides guidance and depending on the circumstances suggests the following actions:

- investigate the alleged incident
- raise the matter with the family
- make a referral to Child FIRST and Child Protection
- contact police.

Compliance Framework

The Compliance Framework² is a valuable resource that is used by all Member Schools. It sets out obligations under the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic.) and reinforces schools' key responsibility to prevent and report child abuse and neglect. The Directors and managers use this on-line tool when working with schools.

DEECD and DHS material that can be downloaded from the Compliance Framework includes:

- School Policy and Advisory Guide - Child Protection / Mandatory Reporting
- School Policy and Advisory Guide - Supervision
- Student Health and Wellbeing - Child Protection
- Critical Incidents: Responding to Allegations of Student Sexual Assault – Procedures for Victorian Government Schools
- Protecting the Safety and Wellbeing of Children and Young People Mandatory Reporting Protocol
- Step by step Guide to making a report to Child Protection of Child FIRST
- Every Child, Every Chance

Links to:

- Child Protection website
- Victoria Police Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Units

Independent Schools Victoria's processes and procedures for the protection of children are closely aligned with DEECD and DHS policies and comply with government education regulations. They are informed by the advice of the Victoria Police and non-government agencies.

Yours sincerely



Michelle Green
Chief Executive

² <http://www.independentschools.vic.edu.au/compliance/students.htm>: child protection/mandatory reporting