

Over my many years of education employment within the state and predominantly independent system, I have wrestled with how best to respond to child protection issues. This also includes implementing child protection policies for our school community and pursuing allegations when they have been raised.

On 2 occasions I have had the responsibility to instigate investigations and make findings, as Head of Agency, that have involved interstate allegations for staff that had since been employed at my school. One several years ago and one just recently. As with all our staff appointments, both cleared their WWCCs and contact with their various referees and previous employers. This process is rightly rigorous and thorough, and neither flagged any concerns or issues that we eventually became fully aware of involving interstate allegations. Ironically the most recent was following a community forum which Christopher Pyne (Federal politician) discussed a range of electoral issues including the soon to be implemented national curriculum that he was also advocating.

The question that I have never understood as to why we don't have national legislation for child protection. I have some understanding of the political tensions, logistics and challenges of state and federal powers but I would think that amongst our community and political leaders increasing "genuine" concern or alarm, that there would or could be a mutual resolve to work together and rise above these concerns to protect our children, regardless of where they live, what the school system is or what community group, organisation, church or denomination our children may be part of.

That we have a fundamental responsibility that transcends these issues. I would hope there would be equal commitment from various child support agencies, FACS and their interstate equivalents, as well as the police, including the federal police. My recent experience was one that hasn't given much confidence in the current protocols, assuming they exist.

I am also especially mindful of the inherent conflict of interest that confronts any organisation's leadership when an allegation is raised. I'm sympathetic to how any leader would struggle to believe someone they have appointed, known and worked with could do such a thing. The uncomfortable reality is that we can also be groomed. In spite of our best efforts, policies and practices we simply can't create an environment where our children can't be abused. The same reality as all humanities numerous endeavours taken throughout history to stop mankind committing the most hideous crimes or simply doing wrong continue to fail. Regardless we shouldn't stop trying which I suppose this is partly about.

I would propose a national policy that allows a uniform process for protection and investigation that may not stop child protection issues, but I believe it would have a greater capacity to minimise them. A statement or intent that is clearly understood by all stakeholders responsible for caring and protecting our children no matter where they live, what school system, community group, church, denomination and organisations they may be part of.

The second issue that I am especially sensitive to is the cost of such allegations. Cost that isn't about goodwill, branding, publicity etc. they are elements to be managed in the event of any investigation. The cost I refer to is the financial cost. The dollars needed to fund a thorough investigation that should meet the rigour, the requirements of any ombudsman

office to protect all stakeholders or necessary arbitration commission in the event a staff member is dismissed.

Currently that financial costs is to be borne by the organisation employing that person or I assume appointing that person (volunteers). Our several investigations have cost as little as \$12000 for the actual investigator and as much as \$25000, without the required cost of any stand down on full pay or pay out to allow the school to move on. I can only imagine how it is expected church or community group staffed with volunteers would be expected to meet this cost. From my investigations you can't even obtain an insurance policy for such an event.

It has struck me what a challenge, even disincentive this presents for any organisation head. To have access to required funds for such an investigation or reprioritise those funds is a tension that may cause even the best intentioned head to "over look" the allegation or creatively address it by moving them on. Sadly it seems an all too common response from the Royal commission reports I have heard and others I'm anecdotally aware of.

We need to avoid this conflict of interest so organisational heads won't be forced to consider their duty of care for the continued viability of their organisation and its outcomes, against those that are part of a child protection obligations. A conflict of interest that simply needs to come "off the table" for even the most compassionate and responsible leader. An unpalatable but inevitable tension that may not be openly discussed but is surely an understandable consideration.

It seems that an enormous amount of work has been invested into ensuring organisations have appropriate protocols for screening adults working with children. I am encouraged by how well this seems to have been done. However, we have not ensured the same rigour for investigating allegations against the same adults working with children. My personal sense is that organisational heads would be more willing to ensure their required obligations and duty of care be realised, including thorough and proper investigation of allegation if it wasn't at the financial cost of the organisation. That the cost or responsibility of investigations is covered by the state or federal government with a special unit via a sub-unit of the police, FACS etc. A process similar to WH&S would be a good starting point.

I also appreciate the recent Royal Commissions that is taking place. Hopefully they will result in achieving something that makes a difference, that allows us to move forward recognising the faults, mistakes and oversights, regardless of how well intentioned they may have been in numerous schools, education system, community group, church, denominations and organisations. That the millions made available could be sustained into the future for our children's future.