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Contribution to Child Protection Inquiry

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RATIONALE

I believe strongly and passionately as educators we have to put more effort into dealing with the issues behind barriers to learning – social, behavioural and personal. It is with this in mind I respectfully submit this to the inquiry.

BACKGROUND:

I am writing to the enquiry based upon my 35 years experience as a teacher and Principal in Australian Schools. I am currently the Principal of Acacia Hill School, which is a special school in Central Australia.

After attending a briefing in Alice Springs I was encouraged to submit my thoughts to the inquiry.

I have seen an increasing need for schools to provide not only an academic education for children but to provide practical social support for children. Breakfast clubs, child care programs and holiday vacation care are examples of how schools have responded to the demands placed upon them by local communities.

Add to these; programs such as social skill development, anger management and social safety programs and a pattern has emerged with schools increasingly taken on roles normally associated with family life.

Family breakdown is increasing in our community. I have seen the effects of family breakdown first hand and acknowledge the difficulties all communities have with this problem. My approach in writing to you is to give what I believe is a very practical way of addressing and improving serious child protection matters.

I do wish to acknowledge the difficult work Family and Community Service employees do. The incredible demands (physical and emotional) in this work must have a negative impact upon their

personal self. Often these workers have to operate in isolation to the broader community and can be in conflict with family and the broader community (including schools) in trying to address child protection issues. There needs to be a more collaborative and cohesive response by employees.

SUGGESTION

I had a successful experience with a system which was introduced into Victoria in the past 6 years. The idea is for schools at high risk (based on socio-economic factors) to have a person employed (or services to that value) who would then be responsible for providing practical solutions in keeping those children at risk staying at school and receiving the support required through family services.

Please see <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/support/primarywelfare/default.htm>

for more detailed information.

This person could be a teacher but it wasn't mandated – the point of the new role was to acknowledge that schools needed support in providing families with assistance when in crisis. If we did that then we minimised the risk of the child being further alienated from the school system.

As a principal I found this person invaluable because they could follow through on issues and create valuable links in to the local community when the family was in crisis. Evidence of the success was the increased attendance of students, improved learning outcomes, student opinion data improved (Students in Years 5 and 6 completed surveys on how they felt about school – very informative way to genuinely understand how kids felt about being at the school – how we supported them in their learning and well being).

This support enabled students to be better supported by the school and local community. This addressed a big concern in the school which was the issue of neglect. My experience is that only in the most extreme cases is the issue of neglect acted upon for FACS workers.

My proposal though goes one step further – there needs to be a direct and definitive link created between schools in the territory and FACS/NTCF. This link needs to be one which fosters a much more collaborative approach to child protection issues. Schools need the same tools that FACS has to enable the ongoing protection of students. Schools could gain access to these tools by having trained staff employed at the school specifically for this purpose.

COSTING

I am unable to draw up a costing for this concept. However I acknowledge that given the number of schools we are talking about a significant recurrent cost to run this project. I am confident that such a project would be successful – the balance between cost and outcomes is one governments grapple with all the time.

ADMINISTRATION of the EMPLOYMENT

The principal of the school needs to have control over the appointment. A job description needs to be developed with desired competencies. It doesn't need to be a teacher and in fact

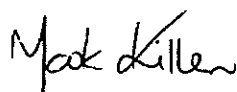
there may be some benefit with it not being a teacher. This person would work closely with the school's welfare team to deliver strong outcomes. The person's employment would be as a member of the public service – there needs to be some effort put into supporting students during the 2 long vacation breaks. These are significant transition points for children at risk and there needs to be some continuity of service to keep the connection viable and enable the school to continue to be a protective factor in the student's life.

PROGRAMMING

Of course the protection of children is a 24 hour per day, 52 weeks a year concept. Schools must do more to empower students to speak out and know its ok to do so. They also need to have developed a moral compass which enables them to recognise the risky behaviour of others towards them. I attended recently a presentation on a new Social Safety Training Program called SoSAFE. The program was designed for students with intellectual disability and provides the students with a range of visual tools and strategies to enable them to know what is right and appropriate in their own behaviour and of others around them. I felt that such a program would be of huge benefit to students in main stream schools – particularly for indigenous students as the visual strategies are powerful tools when children are explicitly taught how to use them. This program has been successfully implemented in specials schools in parts of Australia. I am confident the teaching staff at Acacia Hill School will also successfully implement the program.

This is just an example of a program, but we do need to build consistency into the teaching of social safety in students at risk. The use of visual communication tools for students who may have limited expressive language to alert us to concerns is critically important.

This is snapshot of what I believe needs to happen as part of a coordinated response to the issue of child protection. I would be happy to elaborate further on both of these concepts if the inquiry felt it was beneficial. I am happy for this submission to be shared as the inquiry deems appropriate.



Mark Killen
(Principal)