



**Commission of Inquiry into
the Tasmanian Government's
Responses to Child Sexual
Abuse in Institutional Settings**

WITNESS STATEMENT OF NIGEL RANDALL RUSSELL

I, Nigel Randall Russell of [REDACTED] in the State of Tasmania, Teacher,
and [REDACTED], do solemnly and sincerely declare that:

- 1 I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.
- 2 I make this statement on the basis that its contents can be made public. I am happy for the Commission to use its contents as evidence or in the final report.
- 3 I make this statement on my own behalf. I am not in any way speaking on behalf of the Department of Education Tasmania (**the Department**).

BACKGROUND

- 4 I completed a Bachelor of Human Movement at the University of Tasmania in around 2000. I started work as a physical education teacher in around 2001.
- 5 I have worked in schools and other educational institutions in the North and North-East of Tasmania since 2001 in a variety of different roles. I have been a Physical Education teacher, a Primary School and Secondary School teacher, and at various times I have held leadership roles. I was a full-time teacher until around 2011. From that point I was working part-time. Currently I am on leave.
- 6 In around 2011, I commenced a Masters of Education, researching restorative practices in education. I completed the research but did not complete the qualification. I was part-time teaching at the same time as doing this post-graduate study.

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE TRAINING AND RESOURCES

- 7 I did my primary teaching qualifications through the University of Tasmania. I don't recall any particular instruction as part of my qualifications that were concerned with child sexual abuse or harmful sexual behaviours (that is, peer-on-peer harmful sexual conduct) as part of that course of study.
- 8 In all the time that I was teaching in the Tasmanian education system, I don't remember receiving any training from the Department around child sexual abuse or harmful sexual behaviours, including how to detect suspected child sexual abuse or harmful sexual behaviours, or how to respond to it if we did become aware of it.

- 9 I do recall one instance of 'mandatory reporting' training when I was a senior staff member around 13 years ago. So far as I recall, this was only a one hour training session in a staff meeting setting, and covered some fairly basic concepts about when a person came under an obligation to report their suspicions — but I do not otherwise recall training concerning the identification or response to child sexual abuse or harmful sexual behaviours. It is possible that as a part-time teacher, these topics were discussed on days I was not working, but I was not aware of other training opportunities, and I do not recall them being made known to me.
- 10 Around nine years ago, I did receive training on trauma and how to deal with children from traumatic backgrounds. This training was not organised or run by the Department. It happened because the senior staff at a specialist school with a high population of traumatised students initiated it. The training was run by Berry St, Victoria. This training was very helpful and it has informed the way I teach and relate to children.
- 11 The Department may have had policies and procedures about child sexual abuse detection and response, or harmful sexual behaviours, but I was not ever made aware of them, and I do not know where they were located, if they existed. I do recall that the intranet was quite hard to navigate.
- 12 So far as I recall, I don't believe the schools I worked at had individual policies on these issues. I do remember that one school had an individual policy around identifying risks to children but that was in relation to general risks when you take children out of school on excursion or on sports carnival days and did not cover the identification of, or response to, the risk of child sexual abuse.
- 13 There is a system called Student Support System (**SSS**) which is how information about individual students is kept. It is the system in which we are asked to record student conduct (good or challenging), health issues for the student or phone calls to parents. Staff are encouraged to use this system. There are different levels of access for different staff.
- 14 Generally, if there was a concern about child sexual abuse or harmful sexual behaviours, I would speak to a senior staff member about my concerns. I would not enter it into the SSS system as the student's information would be viewable to all staff, not just teachers. I understood that mandatory reporting meant that I had to report any reasonable suspicions that I might have around child sexual abuse or harmful sexual behaviours to a senior staff member. I understood that the senior staff member would then be responsible for following through on the concern.
- 15 In my experience, the principal of any given school has substantial discretion around how to deal with complaints or instances of child sexual abuse or harmful sexual

behaviours. It is my experience that principals have often been concerned about their reputation and the school's reputation when dealing with serious conduct of this kind. This was my experience, described at a high level, below.

MY EXPERIENCE

- 16 I vividly recall an incident of sexual assault occurring in my classroom between two students. I do not wish to go into detail about the actual incident, but it is important to know that the perpetrator displayed challenging behaviours both before and after the assault. They were abusive and threatened me.
- 17 Students in the classroom were aware that the assault had occurred, and some of the students had condoned the conduct.
- 18 I didn't feel that my training or support systems were well prepared for this situation. The teachers had not had training about how to respond appropriately to the situation.
- 19 I reported the incident of sexual assault against a female student to senior staff at the school. The matter was reported to police. However, so far as I am aware, the school took no action of its own. The school did not address the perpetrator's behaviour, support the victim-survivor, or provide support to other students or teachers. The victim was only offered to go see the well-being officer who was not a full time staff member. I was not debriefed or offered any support. The sexual assault was not discussed at all.
- 20 I was not in class for some time after the sexual assault. However, when I returned to the class, I asked whether there had been any education or assistance provided to the class to help them appreciate that what had happened was wrong. I was particularly concerned about those students who had condoned the actions of the perpetrator. No such education or assistance was provided, and I was told that it was "too late" to embark on any such education now.
- 21 After the incident, the staff were not offered training around child sexual abuse or harmful sexual behaviours. Nor was there formal debriefing or ongoing support.
- 22 The lack of support offered by the Department following this incident made it hard for me to trust that the classroom would be a safe place for me or my students. My health has suffered because of this lack of support. I have had to seek my own support, and this has affected my ability to teach.
- 23 The principal of the school refused to acknowledge the incident for what it was, a sexual assault. The principal never used the words 'sexual assault'. It was not until the incident became a health issue for me that the school acknowledged the incident for what it was. It was not enough for me to say that a student had been sexually assaulted in my class.

- 24 I understand the need for privacy of the children involved, but I was concerned that reputational concerns were influencing the way that the principal responded to the issue. As I discussed above, principals can have a significant impact on the way in which a school responds to issues of abuse or harmful sexual behaviours.

CULTURE

- 25 Generally speaking, in my experience in education, roughly 70-75% of students require no intervention to learn, 20-25% of children need some minimal intervention and 5% need intensive intervention. This last 5% of children are resource intensive and there is insufficient funding in public schools to provide those resources.
- 26 When I first started teaching at schools in the early 2000's, there was generally a holistic approach to education. There was less focus on academic achievement, and more tolerance for diversity of ability and interest. There were alternative programs where a student who had trouble learning might be taken out of class to be set up with a mentor working in a specific industry to help model, for example, respectful working relationships with women.
- 27 However, in the last 7-10 years, as a result of funding cuts, programs that catered for diversity of ability and interest have reduced. The focus is now much more squarely upon numeracy and literacy. This focus can make it hard to give the attention to the 5% of students who find it really hard to learn.
- 28 I feel that the need to focus on behaviours also extends to the need to ensure that we are aware of a student's particular needs, or monitoring what might be warning signs of challenging behaviours, or signs of trauma or abuse. I hope that there can be an increased focus on the needs of individual children, rather than on academics alone, or school reputation.

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED?

- 29 My experiences as a teacher make me believe that there needs to be an openness and transparency around child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviours by accepting the possibility that they might occur, and clearly identifying the risk factors or how to 'spot' conduct of that kind.
- 30 Schools are important to communities, so they need to reflect communities. The Department needs to be aware that child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviours happen in the community and happen in schools. Teachers on the front line need to have support to be able to assist students and to respond in a timely and appropriate way to concerns around abuse.

31 It also needs to become normalised to talk about child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviours. That might happen through the Department providing more training about these issues.

I make this solemn declaration under the *Oaths Act 2001* (Tas).

Declared at [REDACTED]
on 29 April, 2022

[REDACTED]

Nigel Randall Russell

Before me

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