



Department of Education and Training

Office of the Secretary

2 Treasury Place
East Melbourne Victoria 3002
Telephone: 03 9637 2000
DX210083

BRI2059992

Coroner Paresa Antoniadis Spanos
Coroners Court of Victoria
65 Kavanagh Street
SOUTHBANK VIC 3006

By email to: cpuresponses@coronerscourt.vic.gov.au

Dear Coroner Spanos

COR 2015 5859 – Response to recommendations in the coronial investigation into the death of Angel Hensgen

Thank you for providing me with a copy of your findings and recommendations in the above coronial investigation.

Please find below the Department's response to each of the recommendations.

Recommendation 1: That the Department of Education and Training review the compliance and competency of teachers and staff at Red Cliffs Secondary School with the mandatory reporting online training and their obligations.

The Department provides online training on mandatory reporting for all schools. All Victorian Government school teachers are required to complete *Mandatory Reporting and other Obligations e-learning module* every 12 months to ensure they understand their reporting obligations. This training provides detailed guidance on school staff obligations to identify and respond to child abuse. The module was last reviewed and updated in early 2020 to ensure that it reflects the new categories of Victorian mandatory reporters.

Red Cliffs Secondary College (the College) acknowledges the recommendation and the Department's requirement for annual completion of the above module. All staff are required to provide the College with evidence of their completion of the module, and College staff check this information quarterly to ensure all staff are up to date. The College includes mandatory reporting obligations and processes as part of its induction for all new and returning staff, and information on mandatory reporting is also contained in the College induction pack. In addition, one staff meeting per year is dedicated to focusing on mandatory reporting obligations, and this is attended by all College staff regardless of their role.

Recommendation 2: That the Department of Education and Training develop a guide to assist schools' responses when they become aware of a possible relationship between a child who is not of the age of consent and an older student.

In 2016, the Department published *Identifying and Responding to Student Sexual Offending* (available at www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/health/protect/SSO_Policy.pdf). This document provides clear guidance to school staff about identifying and responding to sexual behaviour by students 10 years and over that may amount to a sexual offence. This includes duty of care and reporting obligations and guidance on actions to take if they suspect, or are witness to, student sexual offending. The guidance is publicly available on the Department's PROTECT website (www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/health/protect/Pages/default.aspx), which helps schools embed the Victorian Child Safe Standards and create child safe cultures.

The Department's guidance states that school staff must respond to any incidents, allegations and suspicions that a student is victim to student sexual offending and/or has committed sexual offending by following the *Four Critical Actions for Schools: Responding to Student Sexual Offending* (the Four Critical Actions).

School staff must seek further advice and follow the Four Critical Actions if they are unsure whether behaviour, or suspected behaviour constitutes student sexual offending and/or whether it is indicative of any underlying child abuse. The Four Critical Actions are available at the Department's website:

www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/health/protect/FourCriticalActions_SSO.pdf

Recommendation 3: That the Department of Education and Training work with Red Cliffs Secondary College and Irymple Technical College to establish a process to manage requests by a student supported by family/carers to transfer between schools that will ensure the best interests of the child are prioritised.

Department policy is that school principals approve transfers including when:

- the student is transferring to their designated neighbourhood school; or
- the student residence changes and is now closer to a different government school (where requested); or
- transfer is sought from an Australian school outside the state system; or
- the transfer is sought at the commencement of the school year or term 3 and in secondary schools the student can be accommodated mid-year without the reorganisation of the existing school program; or
- transfer is requested (other than in those instances cited above) by a parent/carer and the principal of each school involved supports the request; or
- a student is expelled from a school via the formal expulsion policy (for students of compulsory school age the principal of the school from which the student has been expelled is responsible for ensuring enrolment in another school or registered training organisation in consultation with the local area team and regional office).

In addition, the Department's *Enrolment in a Victorian Government School Guidelines* includes a requirement under the Placement Policy that principals consider compassionate grounds in exceptional circumstances when assessing an application to enrol in their school. It is proposed that the Department review its transfer policy with a view to possibly including a more explicit link to the Placement Policy, directing school principals and regional staff also consider compassionate grounds

in exceptional circumstances when assessing transfers, as they would when assessing student enrolments.

The transfer policy is available at:

www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/enrolment/guidance/student-transfers-between-schools

The *Enrolment in a Victorian Government School Guidelines* are available at:

www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/enrolment/guidance

The Department is currently preparing a protocol for students transferring between secondary schools in the Mallee area. The protocol does not replace the above policies but provides further support and guidance to secondary principals in the Mallee area. The protocol will include detailed guidance for schools on relevant considerations for transfers that occur outside the beginning of the school year and term 3, and that:

- all transfers of students are to be consistent with Department policy
- the student is at the centre of any decision
- the student's wellbeing is of paramount importance and will guide all actions and decisions
- Community Liaison Officers in the North West Victoria Region are to be briefed on the protocol so that they may provide information to families who make enquiries or raise any concerns.

Recommendation 4: That Red Cliffs Secondary College review any policy relating to its management of self-harm by students and, if necessary, amend it to ensure it provides guidance about how risk of suicide and/or self-harm should be assessed and in what circumstances a student should be referred to a mental health service.

The College has developed a *Procedure for Deliberate Self-harm* and *Tool for Assessing Risk of Suicide* to assist staff when assessing possible student self-harm actions and in completing suicide risk assessments. These tools are regularly reviewed to ensure that they are meeting the needs of students and staff of the College. The tools are included in College staff induction packs, discussed and explained as part of the induction process and revisited in staff professional learning and staff meetings annually. Staff who have a higher likelihood of becoming aware of incidents of student self-harm (including the first aid officer, wellbeing staff and year level coordinators) are involved in the development and review of the tools, and the Department's Wellbeing, Health and Engagement Division has also reviewed the tools and provided feedback to support the College.

In addition, College staff use their available Department regional office wellbeing supports and Department of Health and Human Services supports where appropriate, for secondary consult as the need is identified.

From a broader departmental perspective, in 2018 the Department partnered with headspace to offer Suicide Risk Continuum Training which is aimed at school leaders, wellbeing staff and allied health staff and focuses on identification, support and responding to self-harm and suicidal behaviour in young people. Additionally, all schools have access to suicide postvention support through headspace.

The Department's Mental Health Toolkit (the Toolkit) provides expert guidance and resources on mental health promotion and support aimed at schools and school communities, health and

wellbeing workforces and mental health practitioners. All the resources and supports below are able to be accessed on the Toolkit.

The Department supports mental health in secondary schools through several programs and initiatives:

- **Mental Health Practitioners initiative** – by the end of 2021, every Victorian government secondary school campus will have appointed a mental health practitioner, and all specialist schools with secondary school aged students will be able to recruit a school-based mental health professional. These professionals will provide counselling and early intervention services, as well as coordinating support for students with complex needs and linking to broader allied community and health services.
- **Enhanced mental health support through headspace** – The Department has partnered with headspace to provide Victorian government secondary school students with enhanced access to mental health support. Victorian secondary school students with mental health issues can access one on one counselling through headspace. A suite of mental health training activities to build the capacity and capability of government school workforces is available to support students with mental health issues.
- **Mental health and wellbeing resources for students** – The Department has developed mental health and wellbeing resources for students, including videos on resilience, managing stress, and staying active. The Department has also partnered with Smiling Mind to develop mindfulness resources to support VCE and VCAL students. Resources for teachers and parents/carers, to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in their care, include activities and conversation starters to promote positive wellbeing. These resources are available through the Mental Health Toolkit which can be accessed on the Department's website:

www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/health/mentalhealth/Pages/mentalhealthtoolkit.aspx

Recommendation 5: That Red Cliffs Secondary College review and amend if necessary, any Wellbeing policy or procedure to ensure that each student's wellbeing is assessed and interventions implemented holistically, rather than episodically, and provide guidance about responding to students refusing help to ensure his or her wellbeing is optimised.

The College has a comprehensive practice in place for referrals for school-based wellbeing supports. All referrals are triaged as swiftly as possible and a range of supports are in place for students who require wellbeing support to assess and implement holistic interventions. This includes weekly wellbeing meetings of key wellbeing staff, triage, establishment of support plans, allocation of roles, recordkeeping requirements and review of active referrals. Students have a single point of contact for all appointment communications, an online booking process and follow-up reminders on the day of their appointment. A supportive procedure is also in place when a student does not attend a wellbeing appointment. This includes meeting with a student to ascertain why they did not attend an appointment, but also to undertake a proactive 'check in' and risk assessment.

The College is also using other methods to provide holistic wellbeing support, including some that have been developed as the College was required to transition to remote and flexible learning this year. This includes the use of online meetings, email communication, use of different rooms/spaces on school grounds, use of area-based Student Support Services for additional supports and expertise, and drawing on the expertise of staff at FLO Connect, the College's reengagement centre. Staff at

FLO Connect deal with students and families in distress on a regular basis and have developed numerous strategies and contacts to provide holistic support.

The Department's Student Engagement Policy (available at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/student-engagement/policy) requires that every Victorian government school develop a local student engagement policy. School principals must develop the policy in consultation with their school community and have regard to the rights and responsibilities of students, parents and staff in developing the policy. A school's student engagement policy must include:

- a school profile statement
- a statement outlining the school values, philosophy and vision
- the engagement strategies to be used across the school, including a reference to universal, targeted and individual strategies
- how a school will identify students in need of support
- student rights and responsibilities
- behavioural expectations and guidance for when these expectations are not met, which includes details of a staged response and appropriate supports
- how the school will engage with families
- the process to evaluate and update the policy.

The local student engagement policy should describe the school's commitment to providing support and enhancing student wellbeing. The information and tools that the school uses to identify students who need support should be listed in the 'identifying students in need of support' section of the policy. A Student Wellbeing and Engagement policy template is available to schools online and provides examples of information and tools to include in the 'identifying students in need of support' section of the policy.

The Department's Wellbeing, Health and Engagement Division has reviewed the College's student engagement policy and has provided feedback to support the College.

Please do not hesitate to contact Annette Wiltshire, Executive Director Legal Division at annette.wiltshire@education.vic.gov.au or 03 7022 0943 if you have any questions about the Department and College's response to the recommendations.

Thank you for raising this matter with me.

Yours sincerely

Jenny Atta
Secretary
18/11/2020