

Royal Commission Case Study 41

Disability service providers

TJHC update



Tuesday 12 July 2016 – Day 2

The second day of the Royal Commission's Case Study 41 inquiring into disability service providers today heard evidence from Mr Tony Fitzgerald, current Principal and CEO of Mater Dei School in Camden NSW.

Mr Fitzgerald gave evidence that Mater Dei currently has a child protection policy framework in place, which includes staff screening and working with children checks, procedures for reportable conduct matters, mandatory reporting, and other child safety matters.

Mr Fitzgerald was asked about the operations of the school, its child protection policies and the processes around management and administration of medicines. He told the Commission that the school has extensive policies around these issues including those relating to the administration of medicines.

He told the Commission about the process for selecting personnel for positions working in the Mater Dei Living Skills Program, which involves students staying in one of two residences operated by the school one to two nights a week.

Mr Fitzgerald said he was absolutely sure the current training for staff at Mater Dei ensured they know about child protection policies and procedures and their obligations under those policies and procedures. He expressed his confidence that Mater Dei currently provided a child safe environment for its students.

"One of the measures of a child safe environment would be in the number of allegations ... that are required to be investigated," he said adding that Mater Dei has had just two allegations in seven years that needed to be reported to the Ombudsman, one of which related to concerns about "crossing boundaries and possible grooming behaviour".

Mr Fitzgerald said that when he arrived at Mater Dei as Principal in 2010 the school's child protection policies were well established and required only 'nuancing'.

He said that one of the key issues faced by many institutions, including Mater Dei, is the actual implementation of policies.

He told the Commission that policies don't have force in and of themselves. "They have force and substance because of people bring them to life...through daily procedures.

"We can have an expansive and sophisticated suite of policies across a whole range of areas including child protection – which I believe we do – but unless those policies are brought to life by people in relation to children who have significant needs in the daily processes of the life of the school then the policies are just that – they are a suite of policies."

Mr Fitzgerald said he would be reluctant to conduct an internal investigation into any future allegations, saying he was concerned small schools such as Mater Dei did not have the resources to conduct internal investigations to the standards expected by the Ombudsman.

"I'm not convinced that schools have the human resources to adequately fulfil that task," he said.

"There ought to be access for small organisations like Mater Dei to go to an agency that is oversighted by the Ombudsman and say, from the time the allegation is brought forward, 'This is the allegation, you now have carriage of it'."

At the conclusion of Mr Fitzgerald's evidence the Commission commenced hearing evidence into the second institution being examined in this case study, The Disability Trust and Interchange Shoalhaven.

The Commission will continue to hear evidence into the Mater Dei case study next Friday, 22 July 2016.

Contact: Michael Salmon, Director Communications, 0417 495 018