

Sharing information makes for safer schools, homes and parishes

Francis Sullivan 28 April 2017

Over the past few years one of the many concerns about protecting children in the many different institutions they attend in their early years is the lack of information sharing that takes place both within different sectors, such as education and welfare, and also between state bodies in different jurisdictions.

We have heard evidence in case studies dealing with the Catholic Church as well as in many other cases of a school or parish being aware of an offending priest, brother or teacher but this information is not being shared with others.

In these case studies this has often meant that the offender has gone on to abuse again.

And while in some cases not sharing the information was deliberate we have also seen that because of the failures in systems or complete lack of systems offenders are able to move from school to school, state to state without the next institution being able to track their history.

This has had, in many cases, dire consequences.

In the Church's latest submission to the Royal Commission we have called for nationally consistent arrangements to be developed for information sharing across all sectors that deal with children and across all jurisdictions.

In the submission we recommend that where there is tension between this principle and statute or the common law, the safety and wellbeing of children should have priority over the protection of confidentiality, individual reputation and privacy.

That said there are currently a number of problems that will need to be dealt with including confusion about privacy requirements, and concerns about defamation.

While within the education and welfare sectors there are some established information sharing arrangements in place it is heartening to see that within the Catholic Church awareness of the importance of information sharing is growing.

Last year, the Church's National Professional Standards Office set up the Australian Catholic Ministry Register which provides information on priests either moving to or visiting another dioceses. Previously there has been no formal arrangement to capture and share this information.

We have all become increasingly aware that sharing information is a fundamentally important activity which can have a real impact on increasing the safety of children. What's more it is relatively easy to achieve...if there is the political will.