

Safe schools and the Royal Commission

Francis Sullivan 29 August 2017

Last week I was on the Gold Coast meeting with communications staff from different Catholic education offices around the country and then the following day in Adelaide to join Catholic school principals at a South Australian staff development day.

Both groups were keen to hear what might be the likely final recommendations from the Royal Commission and what impact they might have on schools.

The Royal Commission has had 57 case studies since it commenced public hearings in September 2013. Only a hand full have not involved a school in some way or another.

In fact in October last year the Commission heard that roughly 4,000, just under a quarter, of the contacts it had received related to educational facilities.

Its pretty clear that when the Commission delivers its final report in December this year, many of its recommendations will in one way or another relate to schools.

What we typically heard, not just in case studies involving Catholic Schools, but pretty much across the board was that when someone first came forward with a complaint within a school they were not believed.

Schools realized there was a potential reputation problem looming, so the lawyer were called in.

Eventually the school offered some compensation, generally not much, with very strict and punitive 'do not discuss or disclose' clauses.

At all times the reputation of the school was generally but well ahead of the person claiming to have been abused.

Most of these case studies have now been finalised and the Commission has released findings.

Again, speaking generally, the Commission found failings across many different areas in the way schools approached abuse claims – from complete failure to follow their own policies and procedures to failing to report allegations to the police and much in between.

The Commission has already made some recommendations across areas that involve schools including more robust Working with Children Checks, complaint handling processes, and [recordkeeping practices](#).

What we do know is the Commission is currently working on a volume in its final report focused specifically on schools which is bringing together the evidence gathered through private sessions and public hearings.

And while it seems, now more than ever, that schools are among the safest places for children there is no doubt that the recommendations in this volume will place even further obligations on schools to ensure children are safe.