

Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs

Submission from Mark Cummins

9 October 2022

To Members of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs,

Thank you for providing me with an opportunity to present my submission for your consideration.

In February 2021, [REDACTED], a Year 11 student at St Mary MacKillop College suicided. At the time, I occupied a Head of Year leadership position and had been employed at SMMC since 2014. My career in education spans over 22 years with my first posting in 1998.

Following the death of [REDACTED], I stumbled across Guidelines that I considered critically important when supporting students who disclose, either directly or indirectly, thoughts of suicide or self-harm within a school environment. These Guidelines, to my surprise, had been endorsed by the Department of Education, Catholic Education Western Australia and the Association of Independent Schools Western Australia every year since 2018. I had never seen or heard of these Guidelines before.

In short, these guidelines entitled '*School Response and Planning Guidelines for Students with Suicidal Behaviour and Non-Suicidal Self- Injury*', provide a clear process for schools to follow when a student discloses suicidal behaviour or non-suicidal self-injury. The process aims to best support the student during their time of high psychological distress. These guidelines clearly articulate the need to inform parents, inform relevant teachers, formulate a Risk Assessment and Risk Management Plan and inform the school Principal immediately etc.

At the time of [REDACTED] death, the abovementioned Guidelines were not being followed at St Mary MacKillop College. In-fact, and even more disturbing, these Guidelines were unknown to the school Psychologists, the Principal and the College Leadership Team. From March 2021 to July 2021, the College Pastoral team identified 22 students who we considered were 'high risk' because they had either made a suicide attempt, directly or indirectly disclosed thoughts of suicide or had engaged in self-harm. For each of these students, the abovementioned Guidelines were not followed. The consequences of this non-compliance placed increased risk on these vulnerable students and unnecessary stress on school staff.

From September 2021 to March 2022 three newly appointed Mental Health staff, including two Mental Health Nurses and one Social Worker, resigned because the College was failing to comply with the Guidelines. I resigned in April 2022 because the College continued to ignore these critical Guidelines when supporting students who were our most vulnerable. I made a formal complaint to CEWA who assure me they carried out an investigation and found no fault on behalf of St Mary MacKillop College.

CEWA's 'investigative process' failed to speak to myself or the three Mental Health workers who resigned in the months previous because the College was not adhering to the abovementioned Guidelines.

Since resigning from St Mary MacKillop College, I sought information from contacts at other Catholic, Independent and DoE schools in WA and found that non-compliance to these abovementioned Guidelines are systemic across all educational sectors in Western Australia.

The Minister of Education, Hon. Sue Ellery, publicly stated in August 2022 that these Guidelines are 'not mandatory' when asked to support my call for an inquiry. It is my belief that these comments are false and misleading. In fact, two years earlier the Minister referred to these Guidelines on the 8 September 2020 in Parliament during a Legislative Council question time when she was asked by the Hon. Alison Xamon if there are any policies or guidelines for schools to follow in the event of a suicide of a student. Minister Ellery reply was emphatic.

'Yes. There are guidelines for schools to follow in the event of the suspected suicide of a student, which are contained in the postvention section of the Schools Response and Planning Guidelines for Students with Suicidal Behaviour and Non-Suicidal Self-Injury. (Minister Ellery)

Schools have a 'duty of care' under their Registration Standards to care for the wellbeing of their students. The Minister of Education's comments in August 2022 is effectively saying that the abovementioned Guidelines are optional. Since when is it 'optional' for a school to inform parents if it becomes aware that their child plans on harming or killing themselves. Since when, is it optional to put reasonable and acceptable provisions in place to keep a student safe at school when a school is aware the student is vulnerable and suffering psychological distress. That is a school's duty, whether it accepts it or not.

In-fact, the abovementioned Guidelines **are mandatory** in CEWA schools. CEWA's Executive Directive: Student Safety, Wellbeing and Behaviour requires that **all** Catholic-system schools must follow these specific guidelines when a student is identified as being at risk of suicide or NSSI.

'...the Principal must ensure employees follow the School Response and Planning Guidelines for Suicidal Behaviour & Non- Suicidal Self-Injury.'

The Executive Director of AISWA, [REDACTED], stated in email correspondence with myself that AISWA is a sector not a system and they do not direct schools. It begs the question, why continually endorse and promote Guidelines that they have no power, authority or will to regulate.

Across Western Australian, many schools affiliated with CEWA, the DoE and AISWA fail to adhere to the abovementioned Guidelines and support 'high risk' students with critical procedures necessary to keep these children safe. The reasons why this is the case are varied but consistent across all sectors/systems is a failure by our State & Federal Governments to align significant tax payer funding with governance mechanisms that ensure compliance in each school to these lifesaving Guidelines. In addition to this, all educational systems/sectors/associations in Western Australia have failed to

adequately audit their schools to ensure compliance to these Guidelines or failed to resource adequately their schools so capacity to adhere to these guidelines is possible.

In my investigations, I have uncovered some schools such as John Septimus Roe Anglican School and Margaret River Senior High School meticulously adhere to these Guidelines and ensure they are doing everything they can to prioritise the care afforded to their students. Knowledge of and compliance to the Guidelines are completely non-existent in other schools and have been since 2018. Some schools have quickly adopted the Guidelines in their support pathways only since this story broke in May 2022. CEWA has only recently confirmed that these Guidelines will be included in each schools 'Quality Catholic Education School Review' and additional funding will be provided to ensure Guidelines are adhered to in their schools. Why only now? Why was this level of governance not initiated in 2018?

Educational sectors in Western Australia have simply 'dropped the ball' and in a time when mental illness is rife in our young people and the consequences of these failures are immeasurable. Furthermore, my experiences over the past 18 months leave me in no doubt that this has all the hallmark characteristics of a multi-institutional cover up not dissimilar to the Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse - Failure to acknowledge an issue exists or responsibility taken for those who have suffered at the hands of a governing institution, attempts made to hide the neglect and resulting suffering of children, internal shallow and predestined investigations on behalf of CEWA and the DoE, and above all else, an unwavering resolve to silence, ignore and patronise those who shed light on this issue whilst always protecting the nirvana that has been carefully orchestrated.

I ask the Standing Committee to support a Parliamentary Inquiry into the extent that Western Australian schools have complied with the *'School Response and Planning Guidelines for Students with Suicidal Behaviour and Non-Suicidal Self- Injury'* since this document was endorsed in 2018 by the Department of Education, Catholic Education Western Australia and the Association of Independent Schools Western Australia.

I ask the Standing Committee to review governance mechanisms of both CEWA & Independent schools in WA by the State Government to ensure schools are complying to these critical mental health Guidelines and continual funding of these sectors is stringently reliant upon meeting such criteria.

I ask the Standing Committee to recommend the formation of a Mental Health in Education WA Committee charged with overseeing a statewide response to mental illness in our schools and the associated funding provided for this purpose.

The Standing Committee has an opportunity to establish an accurate view of compliance to these Guidelines in WA schools and with that information, formulate the necessary course of action to ensure our most vulnerable children are receiving the prescribed care under these Guidelines. If this does not happen, more children will die and the impacts of this will be felt for generations to come.

All children in Western Australia have an innate right to be cared for equally irrespective of the school they attend. All parents throughout WA have the right to know if their child has disclosed suicidal behaviour or non-suicidal self-injury to a member of a school staff.

I ask the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs to support an inquiry into this

important issue and be an impartial voice of reason for the people of Western Australia.

Sincerely,

Mark Cummins