

EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING

SENATE LEGISLATION COMMITTEE - QUESTIONS ON NOTICE 2004-2005 ADDITIONAL ESTIMATES HEARING

Outcome: 1
Output Group: 1.1 – Funding for schools

DEST Question No. E817_05

Senator Carr provided in writing.

Question:

Three Riddles

Is the Department aware of details of the media reports concerning the conviction of Mr Gary Riddle, formerly gardener and handyman at Christian College, for 14 counts of child sexual offences?

Is the department aware that Gary Riddle is reported to be the brother of Mr Daryl Riddle, the Principal of Christian College Geelong and of CCISE, and also the brother of Mr Stephen Riddle, Head of the Middle School Campus of Christian College?

Does DEST know that it is reported in the media that the School hired Gary Riddle in 1995 without obtaining a police check on him? Is the department further aware that apparently Gary Riddle was hired as a contractor without the contract going to open tender, as required by school policy at that time?

Does the department know that Gary Riddle pleaded guilty to charges of sexual offences against children in the Colac Magistrate's Court in 1994?

Is the department aware that Mr Daryl Riddle, the school Principal, is quoted by the *Geelong Advertiser* as knowing nothing about his brother's record of child sex offences, including nothing about his brother's public apology to the congregation of his church in 1989, for similar behaviour relating to children during the time that he was leader of the church's youth group?

Does the department know that the school carried out an investigation into the circumstances of the employment of Gary Riddle, and that, following this, the School Board passed a motion of confidence in the Principal, who remains at his post to this day? His brother the campus head, Stephen Riddle, also remains employed at the school – is DEST aware of that?

How much does this school receive annually in Commonwealth grants – for any of its campuses?

Does the Commonwealth believe that, as a condition of Commonwealth grants, schools should be required to meet certain basic criteria of probity, accountability etc?

Should a "fit and proper person" test be applied to those running schools in receipt of Commonwealth grants?

What is the Commonwealth's responsibility to ensure that any school in receipt of Commonwealth funds is properly run, and that the safety of students is assured by the application of rigorous procedures including police checks – even for the Principal's brother?

How is the Government meeting its priority goal of "providing choice in education for all families" if it is blind to the kinds of choices it might be offering to families by failing to properly examine the credentials of a school in receipt of considerable amounts of Commonwealth money annually?

Answer:

Christian School Geelong - Mr. Gary Riddle

The employment of staff in schools is, like all other aspects of direct school administration, a responsibility of State and Territory Governments, and other educational authorities in each jurisdiction. As such, the Department did not have a role in the selection or employment of Mr Riddle at Christian College. The Department is not aware of details in the media concerning Mr Riddle's conviction, nor of the alleged circumstances of his conviction.

The Association of Independent Schools of Victoria (AISV) has confirmed that Christian College Geelong, upon becoming aware of Mr Gary Riddle's record, immediately terminated his services and implemented a requirement for all employees and volunteers to undertake criminal record checks.

However, the Department is concerned about the safety of all members of school communities, and considers that the current variations between States and Territories in staff employment screening mean security procedures need to be improved. To that end, the Australian Government is working with other States and Territories through AESOC and MCEETYA to develop model uniform legislation for staff screening. This will provide a consistent nation-wide framework for preventing people found unsuitable to work with children in one State or Territory from being able to do so in a different jurisdiction.

The Victorian Registered Schools Board has confirmed that this school is registered as Christian College Highton (School 2487 and campus 77285). Christian College Highton (School 2487 and 77285) received \$2,651,307 in Australian Government General Recurrent Grant (GRG) funding for the 2004 programme year. AISV has confirmed that the registered business name (or legal name) of the school is Christian College Geelong Limited (with a licence to omit the word 'limited'). Christian College Highton is a registered trading name of the school.

One of the conditions a school authority must adhere to upon signing a quadrennial agreement with the Commonwealth for GRG funding, is that they provide financial accountability each year, in the form of a certificate signed by a qualified accountant, to the effect that funds have been spent, or committed, for the purposes for which they were provided. They are also required to submit a Financial Questionnaire which specifies all gross income received by the authority in operating the school or schools and in providing activities for the students enrolled and all gross expenditure (whether of a recurrent or capital nature).

If there are specific allegations made about school authorities misappropriating funds, then these are investigated by the appropriate officers within the Department.

The State and Territory Governments are responsible for the registration and accreditation of non-government schools. It is appropriate that State education authorities monitor the individual circumstances of schools as part of this process. In this case, the Registered Schools Board of Victoria (RSB) is responsible for the registration and review of registration of non government schools in Victoria. The RSB operates under the Education Act 1958 and up until December 2002, the RSB was also responsible for the registration of teachers in non government schools and investigating allegations of conduct unbecoming teachers. This function has now been transferred to the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT).

From 1995 all teachers applying for registration with the Registered Schools Board were required to have a criminal record check. This continues to be a requirement for registration with VIT. Other staff working in non government schools are not required by law to have a criminal record check although many schools ask that this be obtained.

A requirement for ongoing registration of a school under the Education Act is that it employs registered teachers. Consequently, schools are required to provide a list of teachers employed at their school as part of their Annual Return. Schools are not required to list other staff on this Return.

The Department has been advised that an exposure draft of a *Working With Children's Bill* has recently been circulated in Victoria. Its purpose is to screen all people - employees and volunteers- who want to work with children.