

Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) response to

Enhancing Online Safety for Children

27 February 2014

Catholic Education in Victoria is committed to ensuring and promoting online safety for children across its school communities. This commitment from the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) is reflected in the policy frameworks and operations across all four Victorian dioceses where the primary focus is on building safe and supportive, as well as nurturing and stimulating, learning environments for all students in Catholic schools.

Such foundational endeavour is readily visible in the strategic vision of the Catholic Education Office in the Archdiocese of Melbourne:

“At the heart of all our endeavours is the student. We remain committed to building communities of learning that provide a safe, nurturing and academically stimulating environment for all children. Our challenge for the future is to ensure that all students in Catholic schools become successful learners who are able to embrace opportunities that are emerging in the local, national and global communities...”

- Stephen Elder, Executive Director, *2011-2015 Directions for Catholic Education in the Archdiocese of Melbourne*

In this context, strategies promoting online safety for children are most effective when there is widespread recognition that cybersafety is best addressed through a whole school approach and one that is understood and supported by the wider school community. Catholic Education in Victoria is continually looking at ways to improve our work to enhance the online safety of children in our schools, now and into the future. The online safety of children in Victoria’s Catholic schools – along with their development into positive, engaged and purposeful learners who will one day shape our society for the common good – is paramount to our organisation and its beliefs. Accordingly, we welcome the opportunity to respond to the public consultation into Enhancing Online Safety for Children.

Catholic Education in Victoria uses the National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF) in all schools as they strive towards safe and supportive learning communities. To that end, Catholic schools in Victoria use the NSSF definition of Cyberbullying:

“Bullying is repeated verbal, physical, social or psychological behaviour that is harmful and involves the misuse of power by an individual or group towards one or more persons. Cyberbullying refers to bullying through information and communication technologies.”

- www.safeschoolshub.edu.au

Establishment of a Children's e-Safety Commissioner

The e-Safety Commissioner should be aware of cybersafety programs available to schools to support the education of young people as responsible online citizens.

Catholic Education in Victoria promotes strong whole school education that builds decision making capacities. Catholic Education aims to develop students who are responsible, ethical, resilient users of digital technology. Catholic schools in Victoria use a variety of initiatives to support their cybersafety curriculum. The majority of schools use the Australian Communications and Media Authority's (ACMA) Cybersmart resources and professional learning and many schools are participating in the Alannah and Madeline Foundation's eSmart initiative, CommonSense Media curriculum and Generation Safe 360. Schools also use the Cybersafety Help Button and ThinkUKnow program. Schools aim for a whole school approach to their curriculum. The diocese of Ballarat is developing an F-12 framework in the area of cybersafety for use in Catholic schools.

It would not be necessary for the Commissioner to take responsibility for ACMA's educational arm or the various safety programs developed by agencies to support schools, rather the Commissioner could work in partnership providing lead advice. It may be prudent and more economical for the Commissioner to take responsibility for initiatives developed by the Department of Communications such as the Cybersafety Help Button and the Easy Guide to Socialising Online.

The suggested option 3 for establishing the Commissioner appears to be the most time and resource effective option. ACMA has established strong links with schools and offers support and guidance to schools – this relationship could benefit the Commissioner.

Rapid Removal of material that is harmful to a child from social media sites

The definitions offered in the paper are appropriate for social networking sites and social media sites for the purpose of this scheme and it would appear that online gaming sites with chat functions would fall within the bounds as already outlined in the offered definition.

The Commissioner should have the power to add any social media site to the participating list and also have the power to remove material from sites not on the participating list should they be deemed harmful to a child.

Full consideration should be given to the inclusion of children within the scheme, both as a complainant and notice recipient with appropriate parental / responsible adult / legal guardian involvement.

Form of complaints

Using a standardised online form would be the most suitable way of lodging complaints. As well as collecting the basic information required, other information needed to be collected may include what is the offending material, and what site it is on. It is important to ensure this process is as expedient as possible due to the harmful nature of this material.

Complainants should be able to demonstrate that they have reported the content to the social media site by supplying a copy of their correspondence as part of their lodgement of the complaint. Ideally, complaints need to be dealt with as swiftly as possible. 24 hours should be the maximum time allowed for social media sites to respond to reports from complainants and again to the Commissioner. The same timeframe of 24 should be given to social media sites for the removal of material by the Commissioner.

The Commissioner needs full legislative powers to be able to achieve positive outcomes for all. That is, have the power to force a social media site to remove something that is deemed offensive. The Commissioner may need the support of external agencies in cases where counselling support may be required. It is acknowledged that the Commissioner may encounter difficulties in attempting to block an international site in Australia if the content is deemed to be harmful to children in Australia. The Commissioner should work with Australian Federal Police and international policing agencies to contain the harmful nature of these sites.

There would need to be a published definition for complainants regarding what is deemed offensive and what is deemed “frivolous, vexatious or not made in good faith” by the Commissioner as some complainants may need psychological or wellbeing support through this process.

All children in Australia need to be covered by the responsibilities of the Commissioner.

Options for dealing with cyber-bullying under Commonwealth legislation

In regard to options for dealing with cyber-bullying under Commonwealth legislation, CECV would be supportive of any measures that:

- assist in providing capacity to strengthen the protection and care of all young people,
- as far as possible, are based on education and awareness raising, not only in the context whole school approaches and linked to the curriculum, but extended to wider community awareness and attitude change.

Based on practices adopted across both Catholic schools in Victoria and many other government and independent schools in Victoria, the CECV believes intervention strategies should employ educative approaches for young people rather than punitive measures. This should be complemented by consistent communication/education across the broader community to build the understanding, support and wide change in attitudes.