Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings

WITNESS STATEMENT OF PROFESSOR KERRYANN WALSH

I, Kerryann Walsh of ███████████████████████ in the State of Queensland, Professor, Faculty of Creative Industries, Education and Social Justice, School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education at Queensland University of Technology, ████████, do solemnly and sincerely declare that:

1. I make this statement in my personal capacity.

2. I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.

BACKGROUND AND QUALIFICATIONS

3. I have the following qualifications:

    (a) Bachelor of Educational Studies (Honours), 1995, from the University of Queensland; and

    (b) Doctor of Philosophy, 2002, from Queensland University of Technology.

4. My current roles include the following:

    (a) Professor, School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education, Faculty of Creative Industries, Education and Social Justice at Queensland University of Technology since 2017; and

    (b) Faculty of Education Research Ethics Advisor, Queensland University of Technology since 2019.

5. My previous roles have included:

    (a) Faculty Research Integrity Advisor, Queensland University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee, 2015 to 2021;

    (b) Academic Advisor to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2013 - 2017;

    (c) Research Lead, National Principles for Child Safe Organisations, 2015 to 2016;

    (d) Research and Development Lead, Best Practice Framework for Online Safety Education, for the Office of the eSafety Commissioner, 2019 to 2021;

(e)   Co-Leader of Queensland University of Technology Childhoods in Changing Contexts Research Group, 2016 to 2019;

(f)   Co-Director, Excellence in Research in Early Years Education Collaborative Research Network, 2013 to 2015;

(g)   Lecturer, Senior Lecturer and Associate Professor at Queensland University of Technology, 2002 to 2017; and

(h)   Lecturer at University of Southern Queensland, 2000 to 2002.

6.   My recent relevant publications include:

(a)   Kerryann Walsh, Liz Wallace, Natasha Ayling and Annette Sondergeld, *Best practice framework for online safety education (Stage 1) report* (Commonwealth eSafety Commissioner, 2020). Attached to this statement and marked **KW-1** is a copy of the report *"Best practice framework for online safety education (Stage 1)",* dated June 2020.

(b)   Kerryann Walsh and Elizabeth Pink, *Best practice framework for online safety education (Stage 2): Expert review and stakeholder consultation report* (Commonwealth eSafety Commissioner, 2021). Attached to this statement and marked **KW-2** is a copy of the report *"Best practice framework for online safety education (Stage 2): Expert review and stakeholder consultation report"*, dated July 2021.

(c)   Elizabeth Eggins, Lorraine Mazerolle, Angelia Higginson, Lorelei Hine, Kerryann Walsh, Michelle L Sydes et al, 'Criminal justice responses to child sexual abuse material offending: A systematic review and evidence and gap map' (2021) 623 *Trends & Issues in Criminal Justice,* 1. Attached to this statement and marked **KW-3** is a copy of the report *"Criminal justice responses to child sexual abuse material offending: A systematic review and evidence and gap map",* dated April 2021.

(d)   Sebastian Trew, Douglas Russel, Daryl Higgins and Kerryann Walsh, 'Effective delivery methods and teaching strategies for child sexual abuse prevention: A rapid evidence check' (Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, 2021). Attached to this statement and marked **KW-4** is a copy of the rapid review *"Effective delivery methods and*

teaching strategies for child sexual abuse prevention: A rapid evidence check" dated March 2021.

(e) Ben Matthews, Leah Bromfield and Kerryann Walsh, 'Comparing reports of child sexual and physical abuse using child welfare agency data in two jurisdictions with different mandatory reporting laws' (2020) 9(5) *Social Sciences*, 75. Attached to this statement and marked **KW-5** is a copy of the research paper dated 11 May 2020 entitled *"Comparing reports of child sexual and physical abuse using child welfare agency data in two jurisdictions with different mandatory reporting laws".*

(f) Kerryann Walsh, Donna Berthelsen, Kirstine Hand, Leisa Brandon and Jan Nicholson, 'Sexual abuse prevention education in Australian primary schools: A national survey of programs' (2019) 34(2) *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 4328. Attached to this statement and marked **KW-6** is a copy of the research paper *"Sexual abuse prevention education in Australian primary schools: A national survey of programs"*, published in January 2019*.*

(g) Kerryann Walsh, *Issues Paper No. 9: Addressing the risk of child sexual abuse in primary and secondary schools* (Submission to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2015). Attached to this statement and marked **KW-7** is a copy of the issues paper, *"Issues Paper No. 9: Addressing the risk of child sexual abuse in primary and secondary schools"*, dated 31 August 2015.

7. Attached to this statement and marked **KW-8** is a copy of my curriculum vitae.

CURRENT ROLE

8. I am currently employed as a Professor within the School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education, Faculty of Creative Industries, Education and Social Justice at Queensland University of Technology. I commenced this role in August 2017.

9. In my role as Professor, I conduct research in the interdisciplinary field of child maltreatment prevention. I have researched and published in the areas of online safety, child safe organisations, school-based child sexual abuse prevention programs, online safety education, child protection policy, professional reporting of child sexual abuse and neglect, and training interventions for mandatory reporters.

I lecture in the areas of child protection, child safe organisations, research ethics and integrity, and research methods.

10. My current research is focussed on prevention of violence against children, and specifically, child sexual abuse and child exploitation, in educational settings. This research seeks to inform the development and delivery of educational programs for school students, professional training and best practice models for teachers, and awareness and skills training programs for parents and caregivers.

11. I have previously been involved in a number of research projects which are now completed, being:

   (a) "Developing a national interdisciplinary educational framework for professionals working with children in the early years";

   (b) "Empowering and protecting children by enhancing knowledge, skills and well-being: A randomised trial of Learn to BE SAFE with EmmyTM"; and

   (c) "Making Prevention Matter: Establishing characteristics of effective child sexual abuse prevention programs".

12. I am currently involved in a number of ongoing research projects, being:

   (a) "A tiered approach to the diagnosis of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder in remote indigenous primary care settings". This project is funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council;

   (b) "Adapting Common Sense Media's Digital Citizenship Curriculum for eSafety education in early education and primary settings". This project is funded by the eSafety Commissioner;

   (c) "Queensland eSmart Schools Evaluation". This project is funded by the Alannah & Madeline Foundation; and

   (d) "What works to prevention online violence against children". This project is funded by the World Health Organisation.

13. I have expertise in conducting quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods research, and am an accredited supervisor for Honours, Masters and Doctoral studies. I am currently Principal Supervisor for five Doctoral theses:

   (a) "Evaluation of two Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) courses in Queensland schools";

(b)   "Barriers and facilitators to mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect in early childhood education";

(c)   "School-based child sexual abuse prevention education: A study of teachers' readiness";

(d)   "Australian young people's pornography exposure and access, perceptions and experiences, and 'pornography education': A mixed-method study"; and

(e)   "The effect of childhood adversity on trajectories of mental health problems across adolescence".

14.   In this statement I have outlined, at a high level, some of what I consider to be the key issues that need to be grappled with in identifying best-practice for the protection of children from child sexual abuse. For further details, the published works identified above should be considered.

CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION OF "CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE"

15.   A key starting point for developing effective educational protocols for safeguarding children is a clear and consistently applied conceptual definition of "child sexual abuse". That definition can then underpin the training of teachers and principals, assisting them to identify incidents as they arise. Legislative, policy and educational responses to child sexual abuse are closely interlinked, and need to be underpinned by a consistent conceptual definition, inclusive of online and offline texts, in order to be coherent with each other. As a result, it would be helpful for any recommendations made by the Commission to be underpinned by a clear and consistent conceptual definition of "child sexual abuse".

16.   Matthews and Collin-Vezina (2019) have conducted a conceptual analysis of the definitions of "child sexual abuse" utilised in research studies, policy documents, social science literature, legislation and case law.[1] It concludes that while total consensus on a definition is attainable, it is possible to develop an understanding that advances a more coherent approach to the conceptualisation of child sexual abuse. This analysis may assist the Commission in developing and operationalising a clear conceptual definition of child sexual abuse*.*

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[1]   Matthews, B., & Collin-Vezina, D. (2019). Child Sexual Abuse: Toward a Conceptual Model and Definition. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse,* 20(2), 131 – 148. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838017738726

17. Matthews and Collin-Vezina's analysis involves applying what is known about child sexual abuse from empirical research, scholarship, policy and legal frameworks, to classify acts that fall inside and outside conceptual categories. It involves asking four conditional questions: Is the person a child? Is true consent absent? Is the act sexual? Does the act constitute "abuse"? For cases where the answer to each question is "yes", all conditions are met and the act can be confirmed as child sexual abuse.

18. Teachers, including principals, require continuing professional education and training, to refresh, update and build their knowledge about child sexual abuse throughout their careers. Such education and training will need to be underpinned by a consistent conceptual definition of child sexual abuse. That education and training should commence at the tertiary qualification level, prior to a teacher's first professional experience and build incrementally from that point. Professional development in this area will enable teachers to better collaborate with other professionals, and ensure service provision occurs when necessary.

HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOURS

19. Where there is not a clear definition and understanding of what constitutes harmful sexual behaviours across law, policy and educational standards, the role of teachers becomes even more complex. While teachers do not possess the specialist qualifications to determine whether consent has occurred, it is important that teachers can identify:

    (a) the spectrum of typical sexual behaviour for a child's developmental age and stage; and

    (b) signs that service provision is necessary, as a child or young person may have engaged in harmful or problematic sexual behaviours or experienced child maltreatment.

20. The "traffic light model" used in many Western countries can be helpful for teachers as an initial reference point. The traffic light model is aimed at helping teachers to understand, identify and respond appropriately to typical, pre-harmful and harmful sexual behaviours in children.

21. The traffic light model sets out three categories:

    (a)   "green light" behaviour, which calls for a simple teachable moment in response. For example, a child touching themselves during class;

    (b)   "orange light" behaviour, which may be pre-harmful behaviour and often requires the teacher to arrange a consultation between the child and a school counsellor. For example, a child repetitively touching themselves or seeking to touch other children; and

    (c)   "red light" behaviour, which is harmful sexual behaviour and requires immediate action, referral and/or reporting. In this scenario, the teacher needs to be sufficiently equipped to ensure appropriate service provision occurs, such as connection of the child and family with a clinical psychologist. The teacher also needs to be confident to step in to intervene if needed, just as they would in playground bullying. If they are a bystander, they need to act.

22. The traffic light model is to some extent reliant upon labelling. The idea is not to apply the label to the child but to the behaviour, and to use the traffic lights as a conceptual decision making aid — to determine actions that are most appropriate under the circumstances. There is some debate as to whether labelling is helpful or unhelpful in understanding and responding to complex issues like child sexual abuse. While not always appropriate, labels may be facilitating if they assist teachers in honing in on a child's behaviour. This can result in better service provision.

23. However, quality service provision in educational settings is dependent upon the acquisition of specialist knowledge and skills. We have a marked deficit amongst child-serving professionals in terms of understanding children's sexual behaviour across the entire spectrum of developmentally appropriate to harmful.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR TEACHERS

Current status of teachers' professional education on child sexual abuse

24. Provision of high quality, evidence-based ongoing professional development for teachers is essential. Teachers need to be provided with:

(a) appropriate training and professional education, commencing in pre-service teacher education, with booster sessions prior to or during student professional experience placements, and continuing to employment via orientation and induction programs, and later at regular intervals throughout their service; and

(b) support systems and processes to guide the responses of teachers in practice, including access to high quality, on demand guidance materials. Materials should be regularly updated.

25. It is important to note that the education of teachers in this space is partly experiential. The main anchor point for inclusion of teacher professional education on child sexual abuse is the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL – first published 2011, revised 2018). Standard 4 is "Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments". Focus area 4.4 is "Maintain student safety". It provides only very high level guidance. Not all initial teacher education courses will interpret this to mean provision of appropriate training and professional education on child sexual abuse and its prevention. Children's harmful sexual behaviour is not, to my knowledge, a core component of teacher training. This is because the guidance is not sufficiently specific.

26. The difficulty with teacher training for example in child sexual abuse, is that the teacher may not encounter it in practice for a long period of time. As a result, teachers likewise need access to high quality, on demand materials to guide them when an incident does occur.

KEY RISK FACTORS IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

27. The Final Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (**Royal Commission**) drew out the need to identify and address high risk factors in institutional, and specifically educational, settings. However, since the publication of the Royal Commission's Final Report, many of the issues drawn out are still continuing to occur.

28. For example, in early childhood and primary school settings, there still remain services which allow staff to engage in informal childcare of children on weekends. Boundary setting and professional conduct issues are still occurring. The risk is higher in contexts in which teachers, children, and families interact

outside of school settings and perhaps socially or where there are limited resources as alternatives, for example in the case of educators engaging in informal child care, supervision of extracurricular activities or student transportation. Interacting online on social media is also a significant issue – particularly for younger teachers.

29. Online is likewise a high risk space for young people. This is something that I have sought to address in my work with the eSafety Commissioner. Key issues arising from use of online spaces in educational settings, and internet use while completing homework tasks outside of school include instances of:

    (a) exposure to peer-to-peer cyberbullying, aggression, sexting and image-based abuse;

    (b) exposure to inappropriate and/or sexually-explicit online content;

    (c) solicitation and/or grooming online by individuals of unknown identities, including children receiving unwanted contact or content online. This could be peers (and in this case their solicitation and/or grooming could be harmful sexual behaviour), older children, or adults; and

    (d) harmful sexual behaviours among children being exhibited as peer-to-peer online manipulation and sexual harassment, grooming and abuse.

30. There is also a risk associated with known adults engaging with children over social media. For example, teachers engaging with students in ways that may be inappropriate. There should be a clear distinction between "school official use" accounts, "professional use" accounts, and "personal use" accounts. The NSW Department of Education has useful guidance in this respect.[2]

31. Children may sit both in the victim and/or offender role. For example, children more prone to risk taking behaviours, or alternatively children whose sexuality is beginning to be connected with pre-harmful sexual behaviours or harmful sexual behaviours, may utilise online child sexual exploitation material either purposefully or in the course of their sexual exploration online. They may also engage in

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[2] https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/policy-library/associated-documents/social-media-procedures.pdf.

exploitation of other children, online solicitation, recruitment, grooming or extortion, all of which constitute harmful sexual behaviours.[3]

32. A number of schools are beginning to proactively apply strategies to mitigate the risks posed to children in online spaces. In my experience, the schools which have successfully addressed and managed the risks posed by the online environment are:

   (a) proactively controlling access, filtering and blocking sites as necessary;

   (b) in parallel, ensuring quality education and engagement with children on e-safety issues; and

   (c) focussing on school policy, parental endorsement, and teacher engagement in a whole school approach.

33. One such school, an independent Anglican high school in Queensland, has introduced a digital safeguarding officer portfolio. The digital safeguarding officer is responsible for the design and delivery of an in-house program where students "level up" by undertaking courses about e-safety. A behavioural economics approach has been taken: as students "level up", they receive increased privileges in terms of IT access; if students misuse IT access, they are "levelled down" and their access is limited. The content delivered in the program is co-designed with students to ensure it remains interesting and relevant.

34. To be safe online, children need education about online opportunities and risks, how to manage harms and threats online, and they must be empowered to use the internet in safe, respectful, and responsible ways. Schools play a vital role in promoting and teaching online safety. A best practice framework for online safety education was recently developed based on extensive reviews[4] and is available for further consideration.

35. There is a place for e-safety in the Australian school curriculum, but this requires further research and the funding of specific initiatives that have not yet been developed.

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[3] Eggins, E., Mazerolle, L., Higginson, A., Hine, L., Walsh, K., Sydes, M.L. et al. 'Criminal justice responses to child sexual abuse material offending: A systematic review and evidence and gap map' (2021) *Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, 623.

[4] Walsh, K, Pink, E, Ayling, N, Sondergeld, A, Dallaston, E, Tournas, P, Serry, E, Spanos, T, Rogic, N. *Best Practice Framework for Online Safety Education: Results from a rapid review of the international literature, expert review, and stakeholder consultation* (2022).

PREVENTION OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Mandatory protective behaviours curriculum in schools

36.   Since the Royal Commission and the introduction of the National Principles for
Child Safe Organisations, measures that are in place for the prevention of child
sexual abuse generally tend to focus on a situational prevention approach. This
approach seeks to reduce opportunities for child sexual abuse to occur by
increasing monitoring and addressing of risks and promoting protection. For
example:

(a)   legislative and regulatory requirements for teacher registration and criminal
history screening;

(b)   jurisdictional mandatory reporting laws at the societal level;

(c)   student protection and related code of conduct and safeguarding policies at
the school system level including attention to building design, timetabling,
and playground supervision; and

(d)   provision of teaching and learning opportunities for children to learn
knowledge and skills to recognise, react, and report child sexual abuse.

37.   School programs are one part of the approach described above. School programs
can be developed by school systems and delivered by classroom teachers, and
have also been developed by non-government organisations to be delivered in
schools by expert facilitators. This program 'landscape' is quite diverse and, in
some instances, incorporates both offline and online sexual abuse prevention
education.

38.   Research has identified several characteristics of effective child sexual abuse
prevention education programs:

(a)   in terms of topics covered, these include: 4-6 safety rules; prevention
concepts such as body ownership, private parts, distinguishing appropriate
and inappropriate touches, distinguishing types of secrets; and whom and
how to tell;

(b)   in terms of teaching methods used, these include: group delivery where
teachers interact and children are actively involved in responding,

modelling, role-play, rehearsal, practice, social reinforcement, and feedback;

(c) the resources and materials used include films, theatrical plays, multimedia adventures, and the use of songs, puppets, storybooks, games and homework activities; and

(d) in terms of program duration, longer programs delivered in shorter modules seem most effective (for example 20 minute sessions delivered once per week over 5-6 weeks).

39. As to the matter of whether the Department of Education in Tasmania should have a mandatory protective behaviours curriculum, where a program is compulsory, it is more likely to be delivered. However, expecting every classroom teacher to develop expertise sufficient for delivery may be challenging. Not all teachers will be comfortable teaching this content. Some will be survivors themselves. It may be that a smaller group of teachers who receive specialist training and ongoing supervision can be trained to deliver a curriculum across year levels.

40. Examples of mandatory curriculum implementation include Victoria's "Catching on" broader sexuality and relationships education curriculum (which has a minor focus on child sexual abuse prevention education), and South Australia's "Keeping Safe" Child Protection Curriculum which has expanded its remit over time and is also now a broader respectful relationships education program. In South Australia, teachers must receive training before accessing curriculum materials.

41. Training was previously a 2-day face-to-face training, but there is no current information about what is occurring presently.

42. In other jurisdictions, provision of child sexual abuse prevention education is patchy and no comprehensive environmental scan has been conducted since the Audit of School Policy and Curriculum undertaken for the Royal Commission.[5]

43. There is no current research on school system wide implementation of child sexual abuse prevention education.

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[5] https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/file-list/research_report_-_audit_of_primary_school-based_sexual_abuse_prevention_policy_and_curriculum_-_prevention.pdf

44. I prefer the term "child sexual abuse education" rather than "protective behaviours", as protective behaviours refers to a narrow subset of child sexual abuse prevention education programs more broadly. Protective behaviours is also a specific program developed by a specific organisation.[6] They have benefited from the adoption of "protective behaviours" as a synonym for any child sexual abuse prevention education provided in schools, but the use of the term, in my view, should be stopped.

"Hub Model" and specialist portfolios

45. The content and strategies for mandatory reporting are well established. However, we have not yet mapped out specific content, and strategies for teaching the content about harmful sexual behaviours or child sexual abuse. This is a key gap in teacher education. At present the factors that need to be developed include:

    (a) material that is important to communicate during any initial teacher education, orientation to professional employment, as well as later during further professional education and training; and

    (b) identifying and developing expertise for leadership staff in schools.

46. In addition to researching and developing more fulsome teacher education programs to address harmful sexual behaviours in children, and child sexual abuse more generally, it would be beneficial to create specialised executive portfolios focussed on child safeguarding and digital safety. The development of specialised roles would mean not every teacher would need to possess the maximum level of expertise. Instead, teachers could readily consult with an expert within the school as necessary.

47. Underpinning this is the notion of a "hub" model. The development of specialist positions has additional benefits of enabling disclosures to be immediately made to individuals equipped with the necessary expertise to respond, report, refer and engage specialist services appropriately. As a result, there may be a reduced need for handovers once a disclosure is made by a child or another individual. This reduces the risk that reports will not be responded to appropriately, or that

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6 https://www.protective-behaviours.org.au/

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disclosures will repeatedly need to be made. This capacity building at the school level may enable teachers to be better supported in their everyday teaching.

48.   Broadly, it would be beneficial to have two specialist portfolios within a school, being:

(a)   **Child protection and safeguarding lead** – this individual would be an expert in trauma-informed practice, and would be significantly upskilled in socioemotional learning, harm prevention, mental health considerations, service provision and specialist referrals. They would also be across mandatory reporting obligations, and complaints handling. They may also have higher levels of knowledge in relation to broader child safe organisations standards and principles. The child protection and safeguarding lead would ideally be equipped to ensure access of high quality, evidence-based, specialist, community-based child sexual abuse treatment and intervention services as appropriate.[7]

(b)   **Digital safety lead** – this individual would be an expert in digital citizenship and digital and online safety, and would be responsible for the integration of e-safety into the school curriculum. The implementation of this portfolio is recommended on the basis of the Best Practice Framework for Online Safety Education I recently developed for the eSafety Commissioner.[8]

49.   Ideally, these portfolios would be leadership positions accompanied by elevated status, remuneration and progression commensurate with the degree of expertise required. This model would encourage and reward the active pursuit of specialist knowledge and training, and would engender respect. Whether or not the personnel in these portfolios would need to be qualified as teachers is a professional pathways issue which would need to be resolved.

THE ROLE OF DECISION-MAKERS IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

50.   School principals and senior teaching staff are key decision-makers and first responders where child sexual abuse occurs in the school setting, or is perpetrated by another student or a member of staff. It is important to point out

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[7]   Walsh, K. Submission to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Issues Paper No. 9: Addressing the risk of child sexual abuse in primary and secondary schools (2015).
[8]   Walsh, K., Wallace, E., Ayling, N., & Sondergeld, A., Best Practice Framework for Online Safety Education Report for the eSafety Commissioner (2020).

that school principals and other leadership staff exercise a significant amount of discretion in terms of the response that is made to a mandatory report or to a red flag raised by another staff member.

51.   A school principal faces an inherent conflict of interest when a report is made. They have an interest in protecting their school's identity and reputation, but also a responsibility to respond appropriately. Institutional networks across regions are closely knit, particularly in smaller scale communities.

52.   School principals need to have a comprehensive legal understanding of what a conflict of interest is, in the same manner as a board member would. Likewise, reportable conduct training for principals is presently lacking.

53.   One option may be for each principal to have a coach, akin to the way that clinical psychologists engage in supervised practice. Coaching assists with resolving personal and professional issues arising in the course of an individual's work, and at times, an objectivity-check. This would provide increased accountability, and a second opinion on their decision-making.

54.   The aim would be to provide a facilitative environment where ideas and approaches can be considered, so that decision-making is not occurring in isolation. This also provides an avenue for further service provision if, for example, a need for psychotherapy arises.

TECHNOLOGY FACILITATED HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOURS OR CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

55.   Grooming is a behaviour that we see exhibited both in adult-child and peer-to-peer interactions. Grooming is when a person engages in predatory conduct to prepare a child or young person for sexual activity or exploitation. Grooming can include communicating or attempting to befriend or establish a relationship or other emotional connection with the child or their parent or carer.

56.   Intervening as early as possible in early childhood to teach the foundations of social and emotional learning, respectful relationships including consent and tolerance can be a preventative factor for children who may be at risk of developing harmful sexual behaviours and becoming a victim of grooming.

57.   Grooming and harmful online sexual behaviours are issues that schools are seeing arise more frequently. There is not yet a best practice approach for

addressing these issues. There is still a lot that we do not know about technology facilitated child sexual exploitation.

58.   The Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (**ACCCE**) is currently carrying out work in the area of online child sexual exploitation. The ACCCE has commissioned a number of literature reviews via the Australian Institute of Criminology, which are being carried out by researchers including Dr Michael Salter of the University of New South Wales.

59.   The literature currently suggests that implementing socioemotional learning programs (**SEL Programs**) in early childhood may assist, particularly if children are specifically taught about bodily integrity and making disclosures to trusted adults. SEL Programs involve students having the opportunity to learn and practice social skills, and generally focuses on five broad headings:

(a)   self awareness;

(b)   self-management;

(c)   social awareness;

(d)   relationship skills; and

(e)   responsible decision-making.

60.   This is a model that can be applied to assist children to feel more confident in raising feelings of insecurity or fear and to avoid isolation. This may interrupt the pathway of sexual abuse, for both prospective victim and perpetrator. While not only relevant to online vulnerabilities, it has utility in this area. SEL Programs dovetail and overlap with other programs including child sexual abuse prevention education programs, relationships and sexuality programs, bullying prevention programs, and online safety education.

Interventions and support for young children exhibiting harmful sexual behaviours

61.   A key question is what can be done to protect and support very young children (for example, children who are seven to eight years of age) who are exhibiting harmful sexual behaviours and may have 'perpetrated' child sexual abuse but are not reasonably morally or legally responsible for these actions.

62.	Offending and exhibition of harmful sexual behaviours by very young children is a reflection of a major system failure. When a young child is offending, the onus needs to be taken off the child. Out of control behaviour indicates a child is not coping with the impacts of external conditions, and this should be understood as a systemic and structural issue.

63.	It is important to have a support model which protects both the victim and the perpetrator in these scenarios. Intervention programs and specialist support services are needed for both victims and young offenders. In an educational context, this means making sure that there is training and processes available to staff to respond appropriately to conduct that they observe and that schools are aware of, and have connections to relevant support services to whom referrals can be made. This type of intervention will require a specialist team.

64.	The work of Gail Ryan (Kempe Centre, USA) is a helpful reference point, as she pioneered family therapy and small group therapy with young offenders. The process involves establishing an action plan for a child, which is focussed on preventing the perpetrator from interacting with other children in maladaptive ways. At "high risk times", the child would be assigned to a trusted adult to assist them in regulating their behaviour, so that harmful sexual behaviours do not occur.

CONCLUSION

65.	The Commission of Inquiry presents an opportunity to respond to the challenges of child sexual abuse, including through the ongoing development and evaluation of a best practice framework. I am available to discuss this statement.

I make this solemn declaration under the *Oaths Act 2001* (Tas).

Declared at Brisbane

on 15 April 2022

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Professor Kerryann Walsh

Before me

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