1. Preamble

The Victorian Catholic Schools’ Parent Body (VCSPB) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into sexting. The VCSPB considers that this is an issue of crucial interest to parents.

The VCSPB represents parents of students in Victorian Catholic schools, through school boards or school based parent support groups. The VCSPB supports the work of Victorian Catholic education authorities in advancing the interests of Catholic schools and their students, particularly in those areas where parent input can strengthen the quality of Catholic school provision.

The VCSPB shares community concerns about the practice by some young people of creating and sending sexually explicit images via the internet, mobile phones and other devices (sexting). The VCSPB’s submission to the inquiry addresses some issues that are important to Catholic school parents and seeks to highlight parents’ perspectives on these. The VCSPB speaks from a perspective of parents who value education in the Catholic faith and tradition for their children, but also as interested citizens.

This is a complex issue involving a number of areas which are outside the scope of VCSPB’s functions. In particular the VCSPB offers no comment on the appropriateness or adequacy of existing laws.

2. Principles

As a Catholic community the VCSPB values the inherent dignity of each person and respect for the individual, and sees that relationships are founded on love and respect. VCSPB submits that sexuality is a function of the whole person and so sees that the practice of “sexting” has the potential to seriously undermine the values of dignity and respect.

The VCSPB acknowledges and supports the policies and procedures of the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV), of dioceses and of individual schools, regarding the education of young people, staff and parents in this area.
3. The Risks

VCSPB considers that sexting increases the following risks to school age children/young people:

- The normalisation of inappropriate sexualised behaviour and the need to act in a sexualised way in order to be accepted.
- Increased incidence of sexual harassment and low self esteem.
- The promotion of a recreational attitude to sex which reduces its meaning to a mere bodily function
- Increased bullying behaviour including cyberbullying, creating long term damage to a person’s reputation and/or present a serious risk to the health and wellbeing of a child or young person.

4. Responses

The VCSPB wishes to see that parents, teachers, school leaders, students and the wider community work together to ensure the highest level of protection for children and young people in their use of the internet and mobile communication devices. Any school level response necessarily should be based on the crucial supportive partnership between families and the school.

VCSPB considers that the issue is complex and that it is unlikely that there will be a single strategy that successfully minimises the practice. This is due to the technology being used, the secrecy that surrounds this action and the natural tendency of young people to conceal this type of encounter from parents, teachers and adults in general.

In considering responses, distinctions should be made between

- Young people who engage in this activity due to fear or undue influence and those who engage in persistent “sexting” behaviour as a form of bullying.
- The level of seriousness of an exchange of messages between two consenting individuals and an unsolicited and unwelcome sext message which could amount to sexual harassment.
- The forwarding or posting of messages to a broader audience with or without consent of the individuals concerned needs to be placed in a different category particularly with respect to persistent behaviour of this nature.

Strategies that rely on technological responses or banning of devices are unlikely to be successful. The key is to be preventative and proactive through education and support of young people and parents. This includes education about how children and young people can be responsible bystanders and supportive friends.

VCSPB would like to see the following strategies engaged in addressing the issue:

- Using a harm minimisation approach and avoiding criminalising young people where appropriate, recognising that criminalising “sexting” is not always an appropriate response. Placing people under 18 years on the sex offenders register has serious implications for future life chances and choices.
• Educating young people, teachers, parents and carers about safe practices in using internet and mobile communication technologies, and about the short term and long term ramifications of “sexting” from a legal and reputational perspective and from a health and well-being, moral and ethical perspective.

• Substantial research into why “sexting” and using “sext” messages to humiliate, embarrasses or undermine occurs.

• Rehabilitation of offenders through counselling, group sessions and interaction between victims and offenders in a controlled environment.

5. Final comments

As a parent representative group, the VCSPB acknowledges the importance of this review and is pleased to have the opportunity to canvass these issues amongst the Catholic school parent community and report through this submission. The VCSPB wishes the Law Reform Committee success in its endeavours and looks forward to its report.

Tony Bentley
CHAIR