Consultation on the Coalition’s Discussion Paper on Enhancing Online Safety for Children (November 2012)

Submission from the
Victorian Catholic Schools Parent Body (VCSPB)
28 March 2013

The Victorian Catholic Schools’ Parent Body (VCSPB) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the Coalition’s Discussion Paper on Enhancing Online Safety for Children (November 2012). The VCSPB considers that this is an issue of crucial interest to parents.

The VCSPB represents parents of students in Victorian Catholic schools at diocesan, state and national levels, through school boards, or where none exist, through school based parent support groups.

The VCSPB supports the work of the 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 and looks to government and whole of community to help protect children online.

The VCSPB’s submission addresses some issues that are important to Catholic school parents and seeks to highlight parents’ perspectives on these.

Online safety of our children is a complex issue involving a number of areas which are outside the scope of VCSPB’s functions. In particular the VCSPB offers no specific comment on the appropriateness, adequacy or enforcement of laws in this area and the resourcing and capacity of the Australian Federal Police. The VCSPB notes that this Discussion Paper is consistent with measures being undertaken by the Victorian State government under initiatives and bullying priorities in education focusing on research, guidelines and a common definition, record keeping by schools, and resources and training for teachers.

**Improved coordination**

Through a Children’s e-Safety Commissioner, a coordinated national approach to online safety, including the development of education campaigns and national guidelines for schools, parents, children and internet providers.

The VCSPB is of the view that such a coordinated approach would be the best use of resources and beneficial to all children and give comfort to parents and schools.

The ongoing work of those currently undertaking (e.g. ACMA) aspects of this suggested role should be built on and expanded.
The scope, nature and operation of the role should be determined by further specific consultation with relevant authorities, groups and individuals including the education authorities and parent groups in Catholic education.

**Support for parents and carers**

*Nationally agreed standards and product requirement.*

A guide/framework rather than an exhaustive list approach with timely and efficient processes would need to be incorporated into an agreed national approach. It would be essential to ensure the approach taken does not become a tick the box process.

The guidelines/framework should be flexible enough to deal with new and emergent technology.

As parents we would expect that a national approach balances these needs and our concerns with how our children will be protected from overseas products and the possible increased costs being passed on to parents.

**Support for schools**

*Certification of online safety programs for schools.*

Certification would assist schools and parents in making decisions about appropriate programs. Any process needs to be a timely and efficient.

Funding and resources provided to all schools to enable incorporation of online safety programs into curriculum and ongoing wellbeing programs would be beneficial.

Lack of awareness by parents has been identified as an issue. The VCSPB sees a strong need for education programs (online, face-to-face, public campaigns) for parents to increase their awareness of the issues and strategies to help protect their children.

The VCSPB in its capacity as a parent organisation would be able to assist with increasing parent awareness.

*Inclusion of a stronger online safety component in the National Safe School Framework.*

The VCSPB is in favour of this.

**Australian-based research on online safety and children**

*The value and possible parameters of Australian-based research (including longitudinal research) into the use of the internet by children, as well as the impact that it has on them.*

Research is important but should not take away from funding of safety programs in schools and education programs for parents to increase their awareness of the issues and strategies to help
protect their children. Research should be focussed on issues to allow for responses or proactive steps to be taken in a timely manner to protect children now and in the future.

The VCSPB acknowledges the importance of this discussion and is pleased to have the opportunity to canvass these issues amongst the Catholic school parent community and report through this submission.

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CHAIR