

Submission
No 147

INQUIRY INTO PLANNING AND DELIVERY OF SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Castle Hill High School Parent's & Citizen's Association

Date Received: 29 September 2022



Submission to the Inquiry into Planning and Delivery of School Infrastructure in New South Wales

29 September 2022

The Castle Hill High School Parents and Citizens Association is grateful for this opportunity to be able to submit to the Inquiry into Planning and Delivery of School Infrastructure. CHHS P&C Association is the parent representative body for Castle Hill High School, and we work with the parent community and the school to ensure positive outcomes for our children.

It has come to our attention that several parents at the school, all of whom are members of the P&C Association, gave testimony to your committee on Monday, 19 September. Having seen their statements, the P&C Association wishes to make this submission to provide our voice to balance the misleading comments made in respect of the P&C Association; its President and the situation at the school.

We cannot stress enough that the CHHS P&C Association, contrary to the picture painted by witnesses, takes the issue of asbestos at the school very seriously. The implication that the school somehow influences the P&C or that the school's offer of employment to the President has in any way influenced the P&C is entirely unfounded. The P&C is affronted and extremely disappointed that its own members would bring the reputation of the organisation and that of its president into disrepute without even trying to cooperate or inform the P&C.

Despite the alarming allegations of a cover-up that first came to light in May this year, the P&C's primary concern has been to determine if the school is currently a safe place for students and staff. As is our normal role, we have been working with the school principal to convey information to parents and we have actively brought in authorities from the Department of Education to provide the opportunity for parents to ask questions and get answers. The P&C Association is not in a position to, nor is it our remit to investigate or prosecute persons that may be involved in past wrongdoing. The P&C will assist any official investigation into such allegations with the limited information we have, but we defer to the proper authorities to investigate and prosecute any offenders and to remediate any further asbestos issues. The P&C does support an independent review of the current level of asbestos and the quality of the remediation works at the school so that students, parents and staff have a high level of confidence in their safety. We have approached Mr Ray Williams to discuss this.

First indications of asbestos

The first the CHHS P&C knew of any asbestos issue at the school occurred on 31 May 2022 when Ray Williams MP presented to the media in front of the school. It should be noted that at no point prior to Mr Williams appearing was the P&C Association aware of any significant asbestos issue at the school. At no point did any parent or teacher come forward and raise concerns with the P&C despite the obvious point that they had already done so with Mr Williams.

The P&C was effectively blindsided by the allegations and sought assurances from the school that the premises were currently safe for students and staff. The information provided indicated that substantial remediation work had already been carried out that rendered the school safe and that ongoing monitoring was in place to ensure this was the case. Assessment and supervision of the remediation work were conducted through an occupational hygienist, and any current risk had been mitigated. In our view, the question of safety was adequately answered at the time.

The P&C Association cannot speak to the allegations of cover-up against the previous principal, Vicki Brewer, or the others that have been implicated as we have no evidence to provide other than verbal assertions during P&C Association meetings.

July 2022 General Meeting

The first concerns from parents came as a request to place asbestos on the agenda at the July P&C Association general meeting. It should be noted that our agenda, other than the standard order of business, is driven by parent input. Accordingly, the asbestos issue was placed on the agenda and, in fact, was the only significant item of business. A full two hours were allocated for discussion, contrary to the 45 minutes one of the witnesses indicated.

During this meeting, the issue of the 2016 report was discussed, but no supporting material was provided. Various claims were made about the severity of the contamination, and questions were asked of the current principal about the remediation work and the current monitoring scheme. At points in the meeting, the conversation became quite heated, resulting in several complaints being received about the behaviour of certain individuals. Despite repeated requests for those raising issues to provide more evidence or information, none was provided. This left little concrete information for the P&C to act upon other than what is essentially hearsay. None of the accusations around the alleged cover-up were discussed. No concerns were raised amongst other members of the P&C Association, these members believing that the answers provided by the current principal were sufficient.

Before the close of the conversation, the President asked that any concerns about asbestos be forwarded to her so that they could be passed on to the school or the Department for answers. To this date, the P&C have received no concerns nor any evidence supporting the claims made.

August 2022 General Meeting

Before the general meeting on 17 August, an email was sent to the P&C President and Secretary from one of the parent witnesses at the Inquiry indicating that an asbestos committee had already been formed outside of the P&C and that this committee wished to advertise their existence in the school newsletter. It was also suggested in the email that the P&C might wish to create an email address to support the group. This was the first time the P&C was made aware of the existence of such a committee.

At the P&C general meeting on the 17 August, the same parent proposed that the informal parent asbestos committee come under the P&C Association banner. It was pointed out during the meeting this is not possible under the processes of the P&C Association and hence the proposal was denied. A P&C Association cannot endorse an independent group that wishes to leverage the P&C's authority and status to speak on behalf of the P&C or school community. Doing so would put the P&C at risk and remove the protections offered under the P&C Association insurances. However, it was indicated at the time that the P&C Association is open to forming an asbestos safety sub-committee provided it is formed using due process ie terms of reference, outcomes, delegated authority and the appointment of sub-committee members by election.

As a result of this denial, the P&C has been accused of trying to shut down or silence concerned parents. This is simply not the case just the perspective of a few agrieved parents.

Following the extensive discussion at the July general meeting, the current school principal arranged for guest speakers to attend the 17 August general meeting to speak to the asbestos issue. These speakers were:

Joanne Marshall – Director of Educational Leadership, the Hills District

Michelle Johns – Director SINSW, Northern Sydney Asset Management Unit

Haysam – Occupational Hygienist, Red – OHMS Group

Unfortunately, the very late acceptance by these individuals did not allow for the P&C to advertise their attendance to the broader school community. Owing to the contentious nature of the topic being discussed, the guests had asked that all questions be directed via email so that concerns could be addressed formally. Unfortunately, some parents viewed this as a way of shutting down discussion.

A summary of the guest speaker presentation follows:

- The guest speakers presented an overview of the works that have occurred at CHHS over time. It was indicated that state-wide testing in 2020 had identified unexpected asbestos in the roof

cavities of all four buildings at CHHS. Works were immediately undertaken to contain and capture the asbestos.

- Certain types of floor tiles have also been identified as possibly containing asbestos. These are being removed during school holidays. There are also plans to replace the gutters and downpipes.
- All buildings at CHHS are safe to occupy, with certificates available if anyone wishes to see them
- The hygienist indicated that they monitor for contamination with all areas now less than the level of qualification, i.e. around the expected level of exposure for a person in the outdoors. The risk level at CHHS is as low as it can be. Certificates have been issued with Safe Work Australia, also declaring the removal areas as safe as possible.

The Inquiry, 19th September 2022

The P&C were completely unaware that there was an inquiry into the asbestos issue at CHHS. The P&C were completely unaware that any parent submission had been made until two days before the witnesses were to testify. The P&C was never made aware of any plans by parents to make a submission. At no time did any of the parents who provided testimony at your inquiry, who are all members of the P&C, indicate to the P&C that they were planning to make a submission or seek to work with the P&C to make a submission despite the president calling on parents to work together on the asbestos issue. Although we respect the right of parents to act as individuals on issues such as these we are disheartened that they chose to go behind the P&Cs back rather than work constructively with us.