



Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools

WITNESS STATEMENT OF TIMOTHY JOHN COURTNEY

I, Timothy John Courtney of [REDACTED] in the State of Victoria, say as follows:

- 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.
- 3 I consent to being identified in this statement for the purposes of section 4 of the *Judicial Proceedings Reports Act 1958 (Vic)*.

Background

- 4 I was born in Melbourne and grew up in the suburb of Beaumaris where my parents had built our family home. I grew up with a twin sister and an older brother.
- 5 I attended Beaumaris Primary School between 1969 and 1976, from grade prep through to grade six.

My experience of abuse

- 6 I enjoyed my time at Beaumaris Primary School when I started. I was excited about going to school, I was a good student and I was reasonably bright. I was young for my grade, so I was small in stature for many years at school.
- 7 I was first abused by a teacher called Wayne (a pseudonym). Wayne abused me many times.
- 8 In or around 1972, my grade 3 teacher at Beaumaris Primary School was Gary Mitchell ('Mitchell').
- 9 That year, Wayne abused me in front of Mitchell, as if Wayne was showing Mitchell how he would abuse me. I remember this happening several more times around that time.
- 10 Soon after, Mitchell started sexually abusing me himself. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
- 11 Many times, this occurred at lunchtime or after school and often Wayne would watch on while Mitchell abused me.

- 12 Mitchell abused me regularly for three to six months of that year. I couldn't keep count of how many times Mitchell abused me.

Impacts of abuse

- 13 The sexual abuse I suffered as a child had serious and profound impacts on my life.
- 14 Once the abuse started, my behaviour declined at home and at school suddenly. I became something of a problem child. I was aggressive at home and dissociated at school. I found it hard to get up and go to school, and I no longer trusted authority figures.
- 15 While I was a good student when I started school, my academic side materially declined following the abuse. I managed to finish school, but I was limited in what I could retain and learn.
- 16 I did not tell my parents about the abuse at the time because one of my abusers threatened that he would harm me if I told anyone. I can't remember the exact words he used but I remember feeling threatened. My parents did not know what to do about my change in behaviour; my mother went to the school to seek answers as to why my behaviour had declined so suddenly. My parents had no idea why I had changed.
- 17 I have had lifelong concerns about doing things in public. I do not like people touching me or standing behind me. When my son started primary school, I found it very difficult when people touched him or interacted with him.
- 18 Unlike some other victim-survivors from Beaumaris Primary School who I have since spoken to as adults, I always knew that I was not the only victim-survivor of child sexual abuse at that school. I knew because I saw other children get abused. I worry about how the other victim-survivors have coped. I can still picture the horrified looks on other children's faces while they watched me being abused in front of them, trying to work out what was going on. My psychiatrist said it was unusual that the abuse had taken place so overtly in front of other children.
- 19 When someone is exposed to child sexual abuse, there are inevitably long-term impacts which extend to families and friends. My family and friends have had to bear the brunt of the impacts of the abuse I suffered, including my behaviour changing because of my Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. That secondary impact on them caused them anxiety, and resentment towards me. The impact of child sexual abuse is like dropping a stone in a pond; the ripple affects many people, in different ways.

Reporting my abuse

- 20 I do not know for sure whether Beaumaris Primary School or the government knew or had suspicions about my abuse. My belief is that people in authority at the school were aware

of the abuse and tried to put things in place to try to stop the abuse that ultimately weren't successful.

21 I reported my abuse by Mitchell to police, but the matter did not proceed.

Support services and healing

22 I first sought support in connection with the abuse I suffered when I was aged in my early 20s.

23 Around 1999, I went to the Law Institute of Victoria to ask about getting legal advice around making disclosures about my abuse.

24 I have always felt like that there were not enough formal systems in place to help me and other survivors obtain support. I relied on my family and my networks to help me find and build my support network. My experience is that there is still a gulf between places recognising that you have been abused and places that help you address that abuse. For example, knowmore has been a helpful legal service to make me aware of my rights as a victim-survivor, but they are not resourced to guide you through subsequent processes.

25 I have seen a psychiatrist and a trauma psychologist about my abuse. The support they have each provided to me are materially different and have helped me in their own ways. My psychiatrist has done many forms of psychotherapy and discussed other forms of treatment with me and has been able to offer me inpatient intervention and pharmaceutical treatment when I've needed it. My trauma psychologist observes how I am feeling and gives me exercises to do when she observes me starting to dissociate. Both clinicians have been very important to me.

26 With the assistance of my lawyers, I have also accessed the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal. I couldn't have accessed this help on my own because when I first found out about it, it was too overwhelming, too complex and too poorly explained for me to navigate by myself. I made a civil claim against Beaumaris Primary School and the Department of Education in connection with the abuse I suffered.

Suggestions for change

27 I am participating in this Board of Inquiry because I want to shine a light on the child sexual abuse which occurred to me and others at Beaumaris Primary School and other schools, which I hope will increase awareness of the risks of child sexual abuse and improve the supports provided to child and adult victim-survivors of sexual abuse.

28 In some ways, I feel lucky that I have been able to draw on my family and my networks to obtain legal and other supports. I recognise that not everyone is so lucky. Currently, I feel that the provision of support to victim-survivors, including legal, counselling and family

- support, is very disparate and difficult to navigate. This is not helped by, in my experience, the impact of child sexual abuse overwhelmingly reducing a victim-survivor's capacity to do things, take on information, process that information and solve problems.
- 29 Mental health services are often hard to access and expensive. I have observed what appear to be fewer and fewer psychiatrists specialising in child sexual abuse who are willing to take on new clients. More mental health services need to be funded and made available specifically to victim-survivors of child sexual abuse.
- 30 I believe that victim-survivors of child sexual would be immensely assisted by the introduction of a 'one-stop shop' which a victim-survivor can contact to report their abuse. The organisation can then triage their various needs, advocate for their rights, and provide the necessary advice and referrals to guide them through the process of seeking mental health support, social networks, redress and recognition. I often receive calls from people asking me to recommend a service which can support them as a victim-survivor of child sexual abuse, and I find that I do not know of a single entity I can suggest that they contact to cover off on their needs, or at least refer them in the right direction.
- 31 Access to support services must also be improved for secondary victim-survivors such as friends and family members of victim-survivors who may themselves be exposed to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other impacts of abuse. There should be a way for families to access support as early as possible to prevent the impacts of abuse, from becoming inter-generational.
- 32 In my experience, there are often delays in victim-survivors coming forward to report their abuse because of threats of retaliation and shame. Again, I believe that early intervention, particularly in childhood, is very important because delays can make victim-survivors increasingly socially isolated. I support the mandatory reporting reform which has occurred in Victoria since I was a child. However, I do not think mandatory reporting is enough and might sometimes be difficult or confronting for school staff to navigate. Independent reporting mechanisms and a whistleblower policy should be introduced within schools to allow teachers, students, parents and other members of the community to report allegations or suspicions of child sexual abuse without risk of repercussion. Such reports should be received by an independent third party, outside of the Department of Education and school structures, who then investigates the complaint. I think Victoria should look to other jurisdictions, within Australia and outside of Australia, to see if there are suitable models to study.
- 33 The standard of education for child safety has improved since I was at school. Back then, the standard was that a child should be seen but not heard. Today we listen to children

more. But the risks to children have still not been totally removed. I think more could still be done to educate children, teachers and members of the community on child safety.

- 34 Finally, I think a memorial for victim-survivors at Beaumaris Primary School should be built. I think it would be an important landmark and public acknowledgement of the history of child sexual abuse at the school to assist in the healing of victim-survivors. A memorial at Trinity Grammar School in Kew or a central one like the Victoria Police memorial at Kings Domain could be considered for Beaumaris Primary School and perhaps extended to all abuse survivors from Victorian government schools. Such a memorial should be positive, recognise the past and show what the future looks like. It could be placed near the Department of Education's head office. It cannot be hidden.

Signed:



Name: Timothy John Courtney

Date:

