

Private schools to report critical incidents

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From next year, all critical incidents involving student safety at private schools in Canberra will need to be reported to the ACT Education Directorate.

ACT Education Minister Joy Burch has announced significant changes to reporting of critical incidents in the non-government school sector, as well as a tightening of directorate approval processes of new private schools being built in the ACT.

Both issues follow concerted criticism of these aspects of her administration by the Australian Education Union.

The AEU, which earlier this year expressed no confidence in the Education Minister, was not invited to Tuesday's formal announcement of the changes, signalling the relationship between the teachers union and the minister had reached new lows.

But representatives of Catholic and independent schools welcomed the announcement as a value-add for their respective communities.

The AEU has campaigned for many years for private schools to be subject to the same public reporting requirements of critical incidents as government schools.

While critical incidents are not routinely made public, they are able to be accessed through freedom-of-information provisions and are regularly reported through the media.

It is not yet clear whether the new reporting measures will extend to making critical incident information available to the public as a matter of course.

Ms Burch said "the new cross-sectoral alignment of critical incident and compliance reporting across all school systems allows me to assure the ACT community that all schools are safe learning environments for all".

Last year, after a freedom-of-information request, the directorate issued heavily redacted documents that confirmed the broad nature of eight critical incidents that took place in local government schools in 2014. These included a near-drowning, two violent physical assaults, an accident (the nature of which was not disclosed), a serious medical injury (the nature of which was not disclosed), a lockdown and two electrical fires.

Ms Burch praised the independent and Catholic school sectors for agreeing to report all critical incidents to the central authority every six months.

"It has been a long discussion over the last 12 months," she said.

"The media would report on it and it was always most unfortunate because there was an inherent assumption that one sector didn't want to report or that one sector had to report. But once I raised it

with the independents and Catholics, they saw the value of this open transparency and regard for the families in their schools, which is why we have been able to get to where we are today."

She also announced a new manual for the "Registration of Non-Government Schools in the ACT", which would "improve processes to ensure better transparency, improved communication with the community and clearer information for panel members" when approving new private schools.

All schools would also be required to provide the directorate with an annual assurance that they were adhering to all relevant education legislation and requirements.

Ms Burch came under heavy fire from public education groups in 2013 for her approval of a second campus for the Brindabella Christian College and the establishment of the At-Taqwa Islamic School. The AEU, Save Our Schools lobby and ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Association condemned the process, ministerial intervention and lack of consultation and asked that the process be formally reviewed.

AEU ACT secretary Glenn Fowler said the union had not been informed about the new guidelines or changes to critical incident reporting.

"If changes have been made to have critical incidents reported in all schools and not just public schools it is a welcome development, but the AEU, which represents more than 3500 educators, has not been made aware of the release of the manual, and has had no opportunity to see what is in it."

"Sadly, we are unable to confirm whether these changes will make any material difference to the provision of schooling in the ACT. It is extraordinary that the union representing educators has been excluded from this process, despite lobbying for it in the first place after a series of ministerial of blunders," Mr Fowler said.

Read more: <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/private-schools-to-report-critical-incidents-20150803-giqw0n.html#ixzz3kSIXAp5U>

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