

No fight fund for parents

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PARENTS say the Education Department "remains a law unto itself" after it emerged that four years on from the DeBelle Royal Commission, school governing councils still have to apply through the department for funds to fight it.

But the Government maintains it has complied with the DeBelle recommendations.

Former judge Bruce DeBelle found the department wrongly advised parents on the governing council of a western suburbs school against telling other parents about the rape of a student by an after school hours carer in 2010.

The governing council members could not afford legal advice and felt bullied into silence. The 2013 DeBelle report recommended the Government establish a fund from which governing councils could draw money for inde-

pendent advice when in dispute with the department. The Crown Solicitor was to decide if requests were warranted.

Under questioning from Opposition education spokesman John Gardner, Education Minister Susan Close has told a parliamentary committee there is still no fund.

"Rather than creating an individual fund, we recognise the right of governing councils to apply for funds ... it is a process, and it is administered through (the department's) partnerships division," Dr Close said.

David Knuckey, from the SA Association of State School Organisations that represents governing councillors, found that "bitterly disappointing".

"As we feared, we have ended up with the ridiculous situation where if parents disagree with what DECD (the department) is telling them, they need DECD approval to question a DECD ruling. How can anyone claim this is inde-

pendent or transparent?" he said. "It should be remembered that this recommendation came from a royal commission which concluded that parents cannot rely on what they are told by DECD. DECD remains a law unto itself."

After the 2013 royal commission, the Government said governing council leaders could apply to the department, which would refer requests to the Crown Solicitor. The Government also ordered a review of governing councils and committed to a range of reforms in response, but did not change the controversial dispute resolution process.

Dr Close said the process was in line with DeBelle's recommendation for the Crown Solicitor's Office to determine applications. If funds were approved, the department would make the payment, but there was no record of any such requests from the CSO to the department, she said.