

The Buck Stops Where?

Interview with Danyse Soester - by Gino Amato

As thousands of parents now know, Danyse Soester is the mother who took on the South Australian State Government and won. Danyse fought for two years to expose the rape of a child in a suburban public school - despite a campaign by our education department to keep it quiet.

Danyse's fight finally came to light in late 2012. In the months since, 75 separate cases were revealed, the Education Minister lost her job, the Education Department's Chief Executive resigned and an Investigation by former Supreme Court Justice Bruce DeBelle revealed a veritable list of failures by the government reaching up to the Premier's office.

Danyse is also a member of SAASSO's State Council. I recently asked Danyse how she felt now the investigation was over.

Gino: Are you satisfied with the findings of the DeBelle Investigation?

Education Ombudsman is a good start but Jay Weatherill has repeatedly deemed this unnecessary.

Danyse: Justice DeBelle made a thorough investigation of what happened at our school. He has written an honest and damning report about the disarray and misconduct he found at the Education Department.

Gino: Which recommendations are most important?

Danyse: Justice DeBelle has handed us a blueprint to build upon and every recommendation should be looked upon as a 'conversation starter' into that subject. Many of his recommendations will need to be extended into a working model actually helping to keep our kids safe under a department that is well managed.

Gino: In late 2012 a SAASSO survey of parents found that 75% did not think that much would actually change because of the inquiry. Do you think that the State Government will really implement the recommendations of the report in a way that will change things?

I know that the Governing Council rights and responsibilities need assessment and Governing Council training should be made mandatory. I witnessed firsthand as our inexperienced and mainly uninformed Governing Council had rights taken because they weren't trained in their basic roles.

Danyse: The Department of Education has acted as a law unto itself, as has our government, for so long that it was impossible for parents to believe that we could actually have change. No one knew that the DeBelle Report would be this critical of the Education Department. The State Government has shown they will not fix this unless pressured to do so. They will look for quick fixes and knee jerk reactions, for example they have appointed someone with no education background to the CEO position (to fill this position last time took a global months long search).

Gino: SAASSO has long called for an Education Ombudsman and been told by our State Government that it will not happen. How would an Ombudsman have helped in the situation you have been through?

They have now offered us a Commissioner that was recommended 10 years ago in the Layton Report – 10 years too late!

Danyse: During the last 2 years my only avenue of complaint was the Education Department (including its unhelpful 'parents helpline'). There was no one who could question the department's conduct. If there had been an Education Ombudsman empowered to investigate and force the department to act ... parents would have known two years ago that their children had been exposed to a paedophile.

We need an independent body that parents can go to outside of the Education Department. An

Gino: There seems to have been a clear failure by the department and State Government to respect the rights of the Governing Council - what needs to happen to fix this?

Danyse: The rights of the Governing Council were blatantly infringed upon. Unfortunately as our Governing Council wasn't trained in its rights, it made it that much easier for the government to do this to us.

Mandated training of parent volunteers on the Governing Council, by SAASSO, completely independent from the department is a must if we are going to ensure these rights don't continue to be abused in the future. I've now done SAASSO's Governing Council training. It is clear, informative, factual & something everyone on Council must get.



The Buck Stops Where? *Continued*

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Gino: You served on a Governing Council for several years and were involved in some contentious issues (in addition to the sex abuse scandal) - from your experience, what has been the government's attitude toward Governing Councils?

Danyse: The Government has not supported local school governance; they like to talk about it but they are unwilling to genuinely commit to them. As this case and others have shown, when push comes to shove, they shove the Governing Council aside.

Gino: Was this a flaw in process, or is there a deeper cause of these problems?

Danyse: Clearly there is a systematic problem for so many cover ups to have taken place so successfully. This wasn't an isolated incident. To date, we've discovered 75 sexual assaults in schools in four years. The extent of effort and pressure that I witnessed to suppress one incident was massive. For a department to do this 75 times shows a clear cultural problem. This wasn't a few people making mistakes. As has been said elsewhere, 'it's a culture of cover-up'.

Gino: You have spoken to many parents in the last year - what are they saying? What is the message you have heard from parents?

Danyse: Change is needed! Our children deserve it! The Education Department needs to be cleaned out! Those responsible need to be held accountable! How can we teach our children to be responsible citizens if they see our leaders and government department's act irresponsibly and not in the best interests of the community.

Gino: Finally, the blame game has been going on for months - who do you think is responsible for what happened?

Danyse: The State Government. The Department head is responsible for the running of the department and they should be accountable. But this is beyond a cultural problem. This is a flaw in the attitude of the department. It is so much larger than just this case. And that is the responsibility of the State Government. Jay Weatherill, and all the education ministers have had more than a decade to instill an attitude of respect and responsibility toward parents and the school Governing Councils and they have simply failed to do. Whether through lack of interest, or lack of ability only they can say, but either way, they have failed to do so. And in my dealings with them, I'm yet to see any hint of change... ■