3 February 2014

Thank you to those members of the Preshil alumni who have raised concerns from the past and seek a response from Preshil.

I appreciate the opportunity to respond directly and hope that you will be able to pass this response on to anyone you think may be interested to read it.

Please be assured that the school is deeply concerned and disturbed by the allegations that have been raised. It is very upsetting to learn that some of our alumni are suffering from painful memories and that there might be incidents from the past that remain unresolved.

It is imperative that we as a school are able to provide support for those who may have experienced wrongful actions, no matter how long ago, and that we have the policies, procedures and structures in place to prevent incidents and ensure that we respond to any wrong doing to our student body.

As current Principal of Preshil, I have thought very hard about the matters raised and can assure you that I intend to approach these with absolute honesty, and will provide a considered and as thorough as possible response to the claims.

Preshil is committed to responding genuinely to the claims that have been made by its alumni and to ongoing improvement to its processes and procedures. I want, therefore, to explain what Preshil has done so far, and what it intends to do to deal with both the claims and the appeals to the school for a compassionate response.

What this document sets out is the actions the school has taken to understand and respond, and also sets out what further actions we will be taking in response to these claims. I lay these out to you as evidence of the seriousness with which we take the appeals, and our desire to work through with alumni the implications for them and the school in 2014.

Actions taken by Preshil so far:

1. **We have provided our full support to the police and the justice system**
   - The Police have had our full cooperation in a case involving a former student. The matter is now in the justice system and as such it is inappropriate to expand on this.
   - When this issue arose I held a series of briefings for our parents to answer their questions and to explain to them the policies, practices and safeguards we have in place to ensure our children are protected.
   - We will not act as if we were an investigatory or law enforcement agency. We do not have the expertise, the powers, or the authority to behave in that way. We will always defer to the police, and assist special agencies such as the Royal Commission, in such matters. We have cooperated and we will cooperate in the future, including by volunteering information as it becomes available, to the appropriate authorities.

2. **We have reviewed all of our policies and procedures to safeguard the protection of children in our care now and in the future**
   - All schools are required to comply with mandated regulations to protect children.
We are supported by a raft of legal requirements, which form part of the compliance framework for all schools.

All adults who work in the school, in any capacity, are subject to regular criminal record checks and working with children certification. These requirements are rigorously enforced by the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority.

The Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority completed a thorough audit of all our practices in the latter part of 2012 and early in 2013. The audit approved our suite of policies set up to protect our students and to ensure sound processes to deal with issues of alleged bullying or inappropriate behaviours. This audit will be repeated as part of a five-year cycle for all independent schools.

While the scrutiny of our policies found that they met requirements we have embarked on a further review to develop a ‘procedures manual’ to bring all of these policy areas together and provide a comprehensive blueprint for action. These practices are supported by a Health program, a strongly embedded culture of “student voice”, school meetings, individual trackers, student wellbeing resources and support from the many organisations set up to work with schools to provide individual support and counselling for children and young people. All teachers are subject to Mandatory Reporting Laws, which require that any suspicion of any form of child abuse must be reported and investigated. The introduction of this legislation and the subsequent training of teachers in understanding their obligations have led to a much greater awareness and responsibility for safeguarding the safety of children.

3. **We have notified the Royal Commission and received a case number if further information should arise**

- Information we have received around any allegation has been shared with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.
- Any member of the school community, past or present, can add information for the Royal Commission to consider by citing our Referral Number R00 734.
- The school has been referred to three organisations that may be able to provide advice. We are awaiting a response from these organisations and I will provide an update on this when I receive further information.

4. **We have investigated available support for possible past victims**

- We have contacted ASCA (Adults Surviving Child Abuse) which has given us the details of professional counsellors skilled in this area. We can share these contact details with any person wanting to take up this support.
- ASCA can be contacted directly at www.asca.org.au or on 1300 657 380
- We have been in touch with the Law Institute of Victoria, who have confirmed to us that they would be in a position to recommend a number of appropriately experienced and credible lawyers to any person who wished to investigate raising a civil claim. We have not taken a copy of that referral list ourselves, and would not have any part in nominating a lawyer, other than passing on the contact details of the person at LIV who can help.

5. **We will continue to seek further information regarding alleged past incidents**

- We will continue to talk to police to see if we can gather information from them about any matters that might have been reported in the past by Preshil, or reported by anyone else concerning something related to Preshil.

**Future actions to be taken by Preshil:**

1. **We will improve our records**

- It has become clear that the school does not have readily accessible, comprehensive archives or records. This is an area of the school’s past that needs to be reviewed.
- As a private organisation Preshil is not subject to Freedom of Information requirements, nor are we required to keep records indefinitely. While there is no indication that this material would yield significant evidence of specific events or information regarding particular individuals, it is an area that needs to be improved into the future.
- We will appoint a suitably qualified, objective and independent person to advise us on how best to undertake the task of achieving greater certainty about what the school has had knowledge of and what can be shared.

2. **We will review and make publicly accessible our grievance procedure**
- This procedure will allow any member of the school community, past or present, to see the principles that will guide our response if they wish for redress of any matter.

3. **We will support the setting up of a forum to create shared understanding of what has happened in the past and what the school might do to address this**
- This forum will be a safe, online space for anyone who wants to take part in a conversation about the past and any future actions that Preshil may be able to take in response to issues raised. The concept is to provide a place to listen to people’s thoughts and concerns, so as to really understand the issues that need to be discussed.
- The concept for an independently facilitated online forum, similar to the alumni page, but with the capacity for all voices on many issues to be aired and worked through has been supported by the School Council and is being set up in the hope that concerned alumni will see it as a space where these issues can not just be aired, but worked through to a common understanding of the facts, the feelings and possible options for resolving the issues being raised. It is not a school run forum.
- The space will be available for anyone who wants to take part in it.
- I will write to you shortly with further details about this forum, which is in the last stages of development. It is a new concept that takes facilitated discussions to the online space, and I hope it will help all of us to achieve some common understanding around these important issues.

I remain deeply troubled that this is an issue the Preshil community has to face and hope that for those who have particular concerns we can reach a point where you feel your school has adequately acknowledged and responded to your claims.

I cannot change what has happened in the past, but I can assure you that as a school we will take all the necessary steps to hear and respond to the issues and concerns of our past students, and to have in place systems and a culture which puts the safety and protection of our current and future students at the forefront of everything we do. This is what I commit to you.

As the Principal of Preshil I am happy to hear from, or meet with, individuals or groups of people who would like to talk directly to me at any time. My door remains open and I hope we can continue this communication and that this letter is passed on to others. In particular, that if there are any individuals with unhappy experiences of their own that they wish to discuss with me I can promise my best efforts to make contact with sources of help, advice, treatment or support, or any criminal or legal avenues of redress.

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Yours sincerely

Marilyn Smith