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Queensland teen cuffed, masked in adult prison

Opinion

Editorial: Yes Minister, we do need to know more

The editor, The Courier-Mail

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THE Attorney-General's decision to consider releasing more information from the Independent Review of Youth Detention is to be welcomed.

Addressing Parliament, Yvette D'Ath yesterday again blamed Crown law for the heavy redactions in the commission of inquiry's report, which had 245 pages blanked out in their entirety.

However, D'Ath added that she now accepted the redaction of more than a third of the 620-page report was "very cautious" and she had ordered a review to determine whether there could be a more open approach to information that is so clearly in the public's interest.

This represents a complete about-turn for D'Ath, who had previously insisted the public would just have to accept what they were given, and follows this newspaper's efforts to force the Palaszczuk Government to live up to promises of transparency.

The \$500,000 inquiry was formed in response to allegations of excessive force and was tasked with finding whether mistreatment of young Queenslanders in youth detention was systemic.

As *The Courier-Mail* revealed last month, the censored portion of the report is believed to include new allegations of young offenders being hogtied. Further, one of the terms of reference of the inquiry was to investigate revelations in this newspaper that 17-year-old prisoner Jarrod Clayton was put in a mask and shackles and left alone in his cell in an adult prison in February 2013 – yet the Government redacted almost every reference to the incident.

There were 457 CCTV images obtained as part of the inquiry, but government censors deemed none were acceptable for public consumption, despite many images depicting practices inside correctional and youth detention centres already in the public domain via media reporting.



📷 Attorney-General Yvette D'Ath in Question Time yesterday. Picture: Annette Dew

The Government had agreed to spend \$6.2 million on implementing all 83 recommendations from the inquiry, but farcically, the reasons for many of those recommendations were concealed behind black ink. Six full chapters detailing specific cases were hidden from view.

Senior lawyers expressed bewilderment at the extent of the redactions, youth groups cried “cover-up”, and family members demanded the full report be made public.

Barrister and Youth Advocacy Centre chairman Damian Atkinson said the Government had “deliberately and systematically removed the heart and soul of the report”. The whole exercise was “insulting” to the inquiry’s commissioners, Mr Atkinson added.

Commissioners Kathryn McMillan QC and Professor Megan Davis clearly wanted their report to reach the public, noting that all identifying details of young people had been removed. So why the heavy redactions? Ms D’Ath has given a broad-brush explanation that Crown Law censored the report to comply with “various statutes” and for “safety and security” reasons.

But as the Attorney-General now belatedly concedes, this needs a rethink.

From the sections of the report that have been released, we know the inquiry failed to answer the primary question it was asked – whether there is systemic mistreatment of young offenders in youth detention centres.

The inquiry commissioners said bluntly that they didn’t know because they had been given only a three-month deadline. It has left the Opposition asking, what was the point of this whole costly exercise?

Chief Inspector of Corrective Services Samay Zhouand will investigate whether further information can be released. The review should not be just mere lip service to complaints.

The simple answer to whether more information can be appropriately released is, plainly, “Yes Minister”.

NAPLAN not the be-all and end-all

AS RECORD numbers of Queensland children sit the three-day NAPLAN tests this week, it’s important to remember that while numeracy and literacy are key indicators of academic performance, they are not the only measures of the value of an education.

Amid concerns that teachers are being forced to “teach to the test” to achieve desired outcomes for their schools, more parents – and students – seem to be taking the test in their stride.

NAPLAN should not be a stress inducer for young Queenslanders, but treated as just one of the many indicators of how they are faring.

As Australia continues to slip in international rankings, according to the Program for International Student Assessment, analysis of where we are underperforming should be welcomed.

This year, schools will receive provisional data earlier, by July, with the full reports released by the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority mid-August. Coming in shortly after the semester one report card should give teachers and parents an enhanced picture of a child’s academic achievements.

NAPLAN is only one tool to assess students. With the rapidly changing nature of the workforce – people will have 17 different jobs in their lifetime, according to the Foundation for Young Australians – children must also develop adaptability, creativity and other “soft” skills to ready themselves.

Using a combined approach to improving academic outcomes is important for the educational landscape of Queensland children.