

Nowhere to turn

Failed by school, police and the church, kids left to be preyed upon by a monster

Findings offer no respite to Perkins' victims

JORDANNA SCHRIEVER
NIGEL HUNT

JORDANNA SCHRIEVER

POLICE, the Catholic Church and St Ann's Special School all failed to prevent notorious paedophile Brian Perkins from preying on more than 30 vulnerable children while working as a bus driver, according to damning royal commission findings.

The child-abuse royal commission yesterday laid bare the failed responses of the Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide and SA Police to the horrific sexual abuse of the intellectually disabled students.

Perkins was employed as a bus driver at the school from 1986 to 1991, driving children with intellectual disabilities to and from school daily while unsupervised. He also undertook volunteer work and provided respite care for students.

The commission found the systemic failures began from the moment the school employed Perkins without seeking a police check that would have revealed he had three convictions for child abuse.

It also found the subsequent police investigation had failed on numerous levels, including its initial questioning of victims and failure to follow up or notify the school community of

ROYAL COMMISSION KEY FINDINGS

■ THE school did not comply with its own policy requiring that volunteers be supervised by a registered teacher, which created further opportunities for Perkins to sexually abuse children in his care.

■ THE Catholic Education Office did not have a policy on respite care by employees or volunteers.

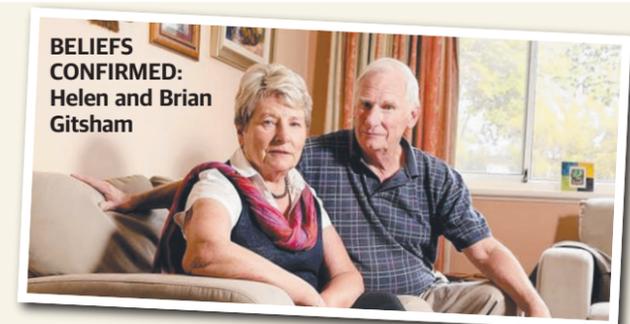
■ AFTER complaints were made about Perkins in 1991, police investigated and pornographic photographs of students who attended the school were found at his home. However it was not until 2003 that he was convicted of five sexual offences against three students at St Ann's and sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment.

■ THE school principal did not inform the board of management,

the board of governors or the director of the Catholic Education Office of the sexual allegations regarding Perkins, despite requirements to do so.

■ CHURCH parties failed to take appropriate action in ensuring the matters were fully reported and investigated and that families concerned were informed and children protected.

■ POLICE failed to issue a warrant for the arrest of Perkins in 1991, despite having information about his prior convictions, the nature of sexual allegations against him and the risk he posed of further sexual offences against children. In 1998, it was discovered Perkins was living in Queensland, but police declined to apply to extradite him on the basis of



BELIEFS CONFIRMED: Helen and Brian Gitsham

inaccurate information, including the seriousness of the charges.

■ POLICE did not inform the broader school community of the sexual allegations against Perkins despite being aware that other former students with intellectual disabilities and limited verbal capacity may have made contact with Perkins.

■ THE Catholic Church did not follow processes set out in Towards Healing, its principles and procedures in responding to complaints of abuse against Catholic Church personnel.

■ THE payment of 'gifts' to former students of St Ann's did not provide an adequate response to some families.

■ THE commission notes that at the time of Perkins' employment in 1986, St Ann's was not required to conduct a

police clearance check as part of its employment process. Neither the school nor the Catholic Education Office had established mechanisms in place for the conduct of these checks. The principal, Mr Claude Hamam, below, did not obtain a police clearance check before employing Mr Perkins and that such a check would likely have disclosed that Perkins had three prior convictions for sexual offences.



PREDATOR DIED IN PRISON

1956 Brian Perkins, left, convicted of abduction of a child by force or fraud, sentenced to a three-year good behaviour bond.

1968 Perkins convicted of carnal knowledge or attempted carnal knowledge and sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment.

1974 He is convicted of carnal knowledge or attempted carnal knowledge and sentenced to two months' imprisonment and a \$50 fine.

1986 Perkins applies for a job at St Ann's as a bus driver.

1991 SA police receive allegations against Perkins from a former St Ann's student with intellectual disabilities.

1993 After receiving photos

depicting naked men with young male children, police establish Operation Deny to investigate Perkins.

1998 Perkins is found living in Queensland, but police do not apply to extradite him.

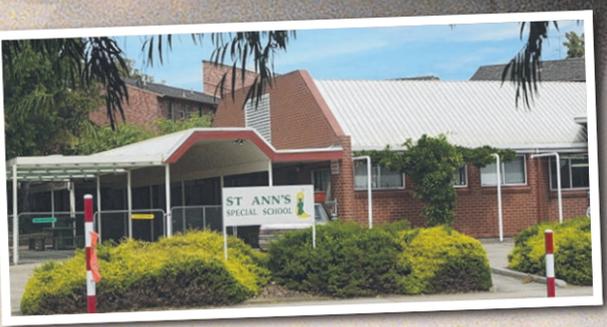
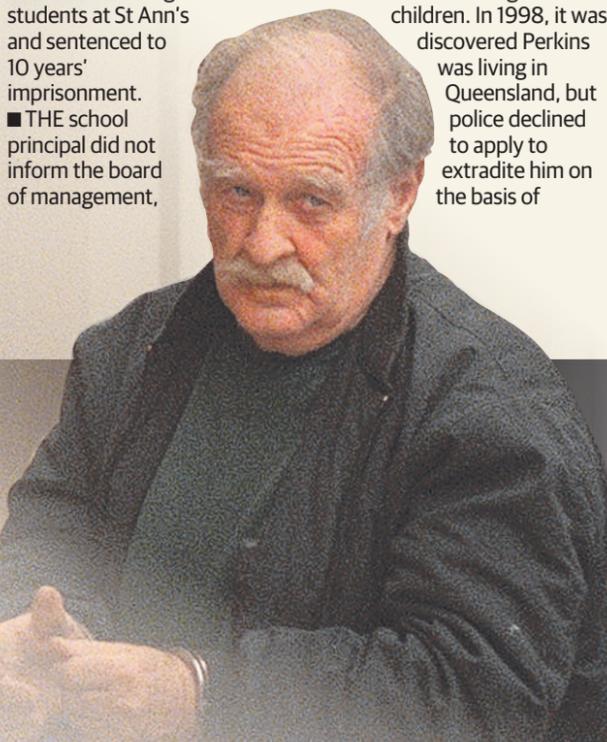
2001 Archbishop Philip Wilson commissions an inquiry into what had happened at St Ann's in 1991.

2002 Perkins arrested in Queensland.

2003 Perkins sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment.

2009 Perkins dies in prison.

2014 Royal Commission investigation into responses to child-sex abuse at St Ann's Special School launched in March.



If such a crime was reported today, the police response would be very different

the allegations. In response to the report, police yesterday released a statement agreeing its investigation into Perkins was not adequate — compared to today's standards — and said numerous policy, process and procedural improvements had since been made.

A spokeswoman for the Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide said the findings would be considered.

The royal commission report found school principal Claude Hamam failed to comply with its own employment and volunteer policies, which allowed Perkins to have unsupervised access to the school's students.

It also failed to notify the Catholic Education Office of the allegations.

It found police failed in its investigation of the matter, including failing to seek a warrant for his arrest in 1991, despite knowledge of his convictions, further allegations and the risk he posed of further sex offences against children.

It also found that despite discovering Perkins was living in Queensland in 1998, police declined to apply to extradite

him on the basis of inaccurate information, including the seriousness of the charges.

They also declined an offer from the church to pay for his extradition to SA in 2001.

The report also found the Catholic Church's payment of "gifts" to former students was not an adequate response to some families, and that the church had not followed its own Towards Healing procedures set up for such cases.

Perkins sexually abused more than 30 children with in-

tellectual disabilities. He was charged in 1993, but fled Adelaide after skipping bail in January, 1994. He was finally arrested and extradited back to Adelaide in 2002.

He pleaded guilty to five sex offences against three St Ann's students and was sentenced to 10 years in jail in 2003. He died in prison in 2009.

Police say they accept that their 1991 response was "not adequate in contrast to today's standards".

"If such a crime was repor-

ted today, the police response would be very different," a spokesman said.

"In the 25 years which have passed since, SAPOL has made numerous policy, process and procedural improvements, in line with national and international best practice.

"SAPOL also has a Special Crimes Investigation Branch incorporating a dedicated victim management section specifically trained in the forensic interviewing of children that have been the subject of

sexual abuse or have special needs."

A spokeswoman for the Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide said it welcomed the royal commission's report and would be "looking closely at the findings as part of its commitment to provide the highest standard of child protection practices and procedures for all children in its care".

Opposition disability spokesman Duncan McFetridge said that "there's a lot of lessons to be learnt from this".

THE mother of one of Brian Perkins' vulnerable young victims says the royal commission findings would allow those affected to "get the real truth", but the horrific crimes would live with them forever.

Helen Gitsham told *The Advertiser* the commission had confirmed her beliefs about the scandal that "anything that could go wrong did go wrong".

Her son, David, attended the St Ann's Special School from 1975 to 1988 while the paedophile bus driver was employed there.

His behaviour deteriorated years later, but it was not until 2001 when the abuse was uncovered publicly they began to suspect he had been a victim. He was diagnosed with stomach cancer in 2005 and died shortly after.

Mrs Gitsham said the findings had vindicated her suspicions about the entire process — that everyone involved had failed the victims of abuse.

"It was a healing process to find out the information that no one would tell us before," she said.

"This has been totally consuming for 13-14 years, we are glad to finally see an end to it."

A lawyer for seven of the victims said the findings would do nothing to alleviate their suffering. Duncan



Basheer Hannon lawyer Peter Humphries, above, last night said that "there are no winners in this".

Mr Humphries said three compensation cases had been settled this year, but another three were still being negotiated. He now wants the Catholic Church to formally apologise to the victims.

The father of one, now aged 46, said he was still "very bitter" about his lengthy battle with the Catholic Church for compensation and assistance.

"There has been no compassion from the church in the years and years we have been fighting them over this," he said. "They were more concerned with protecting themselves ...

"We settled with the church, but it is less than a 10th of what we need for my son's care. They caused it and we are stuck with the problem."

Another parent, whose son is now 37, said she was pleased the public now knew all of the failings by each organisation involved in the case.

"They have treated us like dirt and the kids like they are insignificant and protecting the paedophiles," she said.

"I do not feel vindicated with this, but I am glad it is out in the open."