



**Statement by leave: Harrison School
18 September 2018**

As members would be aware, non-friable asbestos containing material has recently been identified at Harrison Public School and Mother Teresa Catholic Primary School in Harrison.

I would like to take this opportunity to provide an update about this matter to members and the community, particularly in relation to Harrison School.

Harrison School occupies a site of around nine hectares and features extensive garden beds. The garden beds are filled with a mixture of gravel and recycled building material.

On **Monday, 27 August 2018** a parent emailed the school about whether the recycled building material located within the garden beds had been tested for substances such as asbestos.

The Education Directorate was proactive and ordered this testing the same day.

This was despite considering this to be an entirely precautionary measure because the use of asbestos in building materials was banned in Australia in 2003 and public school construction contracts also prevent the use of unapproved dangerous substances.

Licensed asbestos assessors attended the school on **Tuesday, 28 August** to collect samples for testing.

The Education Directorate received the final testing report from the assessors on the afternoon of **Wednesday, 29 August** showing that a small amount of non-friable asbestos-containing material, in the form of cement sheet debris, had been identified in some garden beds at the school.

The Directorate notified WorkSafe ACT of this discovery and ordered sampling and testing of all remaining garden beds at Harrison School.

On this day the directorate also engaged its central communications team in anticipation of communications to the school community – to be planned for, importantly, in a calm and measured way so as not to cause unnecessary alarm.

All garden beds were declared “out of bounds” for students from when they returned to school on **Thursday, 30 August** and fencing began to be installed to prevent access to the garden beds.

The Directorate immediately started preparing information for parents, including a letter that was distributed to the school community via email before the end of school on **Thursday, 30 August** to inform parents and carers what was happening.

The Education Directorate also posted information about the discovery of asbestos-containing material at Harrison School on the ACT Public Schools Facebook page on that same day.

The Education Directorate organised four guards to be stationed at the school from Thursday evening to prevent access to the garden beds until more fences could be erected.

On **Friday 31 August** there was a wet weather day and students remained indoors during recess and lunch breaks while fencing work continued.

Fencing continued over the weekend and all internal fencing was completed by **Monday, 3 September 2018**, meaning all internal garden beds were inaccessible to students, staff and visitors to the school grounds.

Ongoing sampling by licensed asbestos assessors of all the remaining garden beds at Harrison School occurred on **30 August, 3 September** and **4 September**.

Information about this was, of course, shared with the regulator WorkSafe ACT as it was received by the Education Directorate.

While the sampling and testing was occurring the Directorate was also reviewing construction files and invoices over the past decade to assist with the identification of potential sources of the asbestos-containing material and providing this information to WorkSafe ACT.

The final testing report from the samples taken was received by the Education Directorate and provided to WorkSafe ACT on **10 September**.

All garden beds at the school were visually assessed for asbestos by licensed asbestos assessors.

During this process, 55 pieces of cement sheet debris were collected for testing. Of these 55 pieces, 25 were found to contain asbestos.

Importantly, **all asbestos-containing material was assessed as non-friable in nature.**

Further, it is important to note that the Chief Health Officer has provided advice that the non-friable asbestos found at Harrison School presents a low risk of releasing airborne fibres.

Nevertheless, the government understands that the discovery of asbestos at a relatively new school raises questions and concerns.

The Education Directorate and Harrison School have been working with the school community to provide information and answer questions.

The school principal has been providing regular email updates to the school community, and Education Support Office staff have been attending the school at drop-off and pick-up times to speak with parents and carers.

Information has also been provided to the community via the Harrison School P&C and I would like to thank them for this.

Last Wednesday night (12 September), the Education Support Office, ACT Health and WorkSafe ACT attended a Harrison School P&C meeting to further discuss the issue and answer any outstanding questions from parents and carers at a time working parents were more likely to be able to attend.

Across the board the school community has shown great calm and understanding in the response to this issue, despite the efforts of some members of this place to scare them.

WorkSafe ACT is responsible for the investigation into the source of the material, including how long it has been there, and the Education Directorate has provided WorkSafe with all its information about contractors associated with works at the school throughout the school's history. This has been an extensive exercise of obtaining and reviewing files over the past decade.

Day-to-day school life has continued.

The school is using neighbouring ovals for additional play space and is receiving ongoing assistance with traffic control at peak times given the reduced parking space.

Again, this is a testament to school principal Jason Holmes and his team, as well as the officials in the Education Directorate and Worksafe ACT.

A remediation plan to remove all garden bed materials is now being developed.

This will involve the removal of all the gravel fill and vegetation from garden beds at the school by a licensed asbestos removalist taking appropriate safety precautions.

This will be an extensive process and I expect work to begin during the next school holidays.

Following remediation of the site, the garden beds will be rehabilitated with input from the school community.

Should Worksafe recommend any further action either at Harrison or other Education facilities, we will of course work with them to ensure necessary precautions are taken.

ACT Government officials have also been liaising with representatives of Mother Teresa Catholic Primary School and the Catholic Education Office in responding to a similar discovery there.

Again, Worksafe is the key investigating agency for how the asbestos may have come to be at Mother Teresa and I hope that their findings can help answer the remaining questions at both schools.

I would also like to thank and acknowledge the leadership and proactive response from Catholic Education in their response to this issue.

I thank the Assembly for the chance to provide this update and, as I have always done on sensitive issues such as this, will continue to provide information to the Assembly and community as it is appropriate to do so.

