

# Book Reviews

## **School Principals Legal Guide**

CCH Australia: Sydney

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The *School Principals Legal Guide* is a package of a 350 page loose reference manual, a **CD-ROM** version of the reference manual and a monthly newsletter, *School Principal*. The reference manual, and **CD-ROM**, will be updated for an additional cost.

The reference manual consists of three sections. The first of these is a well set out and structured 11-page index to Chapter Two. Chapter One comprises a brief, five-page overview of the history of education in Australia and identifies some of the current and emerging legal issues. The brevity of this section limits its usefulness and it merely serves as a pointer to entries in the main section of the manual.

The main section of the reference manual is Chapter Two, which provides an alphabetical series of entries on a range of education law issues. Each entry is structured in the same basic format. Firstly the relevant issue is identified or explained. The relevant law is then outlined and this is followed up by practical advice on managing the particular issue. Each entry concludes with cross-references to other relevant entries and a number also have details of where further information on the topic can be obtained.

The preface to the reference manual indicates that the publication seeks to provide ‘a comprehensive overview of principals’ legal obligations’ and ‘practical management tips to help avoid legal difficulties and manage risks in schools’. While a very noble aim it is also an almost impossible task given the breadth of issues involved and the complications that arise both from Australia’s numerous legal jurisdictions and variety of school types. Unless the publication was to greatly increase in size the choice of issues included in Chapter Two will remain a compromise and the *Guide* will fail to achieve its lofty goal.

The desire for breadth of coverage has resulted in a number of areas of considerable practical importance being treated rather superficially. Copyright, dealt with in the entry on Intellectual Property, is one such area. The entry largely restricts itself to discussion of print copying and fails to address other copyright areas. The complexity of the various rights that may be involved in, say, the production of school musicals is not addressed yet poses an almost annual problem for school principals. The entry on Family Law is also somewhat superficial omitting discussion of a number of practical issues such as the determination of the name to be used for a student. While relatively minor this is a common problem and one that often causes considerable emotional turmoil amongst parents.

The choice of issues to include in the reference manual and their relative prominence is also somewhat curious. There is certainly a strong focus on matters pertaining to occupational health and safety, which comprise a significant portion of the manual. Some issues, such as PAYE, have also been dealt with in considerable detail.

The worth of the inclusion of a five page entry on this topic when there are already a number of publications, including those from the Australian Taxation Office, on the subject is, to the reviewer, questionable. Similarly the need for an entry on Political Education seems debatable.

Overall the entries in the reference section also seem to have an orientation towards government schools both in the choice of entries themselves. The entry relating to student records and files thus indicates that 'they may be accessed through freedom of information legislation'. For principals of non-government schools without any significant levels of legal knowledge this may be of considerable, unnecessary, concern. While government schools are certainly in the majority there are still more than 2,500 non-government schools in Australia whose needs should be considered.

The **CD-ROM** version of the reference manual has the same text as the loose-leaf version but is fully searchable. As well as standard searches, that can include the use of the normal AND, OR, and NOT connectors as well as wildcards, the reference manual can be searched using proximity searches.

Hyperlinks in each entry also allow users to skip directly to related entries for ease of navigation. All entries or parts of entries can be printed or copied to a word processing program. The help function is well laid out and generally the electronic version is easy to use. Unfortunately in this initial edition the template documents referred to in the accompanying documentation are not available. When developed these templates will be one of the most useful features of the electronic reference manual.

The final component of the package, the monthly newsletter is a worthwhile and valuable resource. In a generally non-legalistic manner it provides a blend of discussion regarding current legal issues affecting schools and snippets of news about changes in the legal environment. The monthly reminder of the need to consider legal aspects of school management that the newsletter provides may be indeed be one of the major benefits to schools and school principals of the publication.

Obviously it is relatively easy to be critical of a publication that attempts so much. Despite these shortcomings the reference manual is still an invaluable tool for school principals. Clearly the *School Principals Legal Guide* is not a substitute for professional advice but nor is this its aim. The style of the manual is certainly practical rather than theoretical and the advice that it gives is generally very sound and sensible. Given the strength of the editorial advisory board that has been assembled for the publication any initial failings will undoubtedly be overcome as the publication develops through subsequent editions.

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