

Edmund Rice College was 'a dumping ground' for child sex predators: Stephen Jones MP

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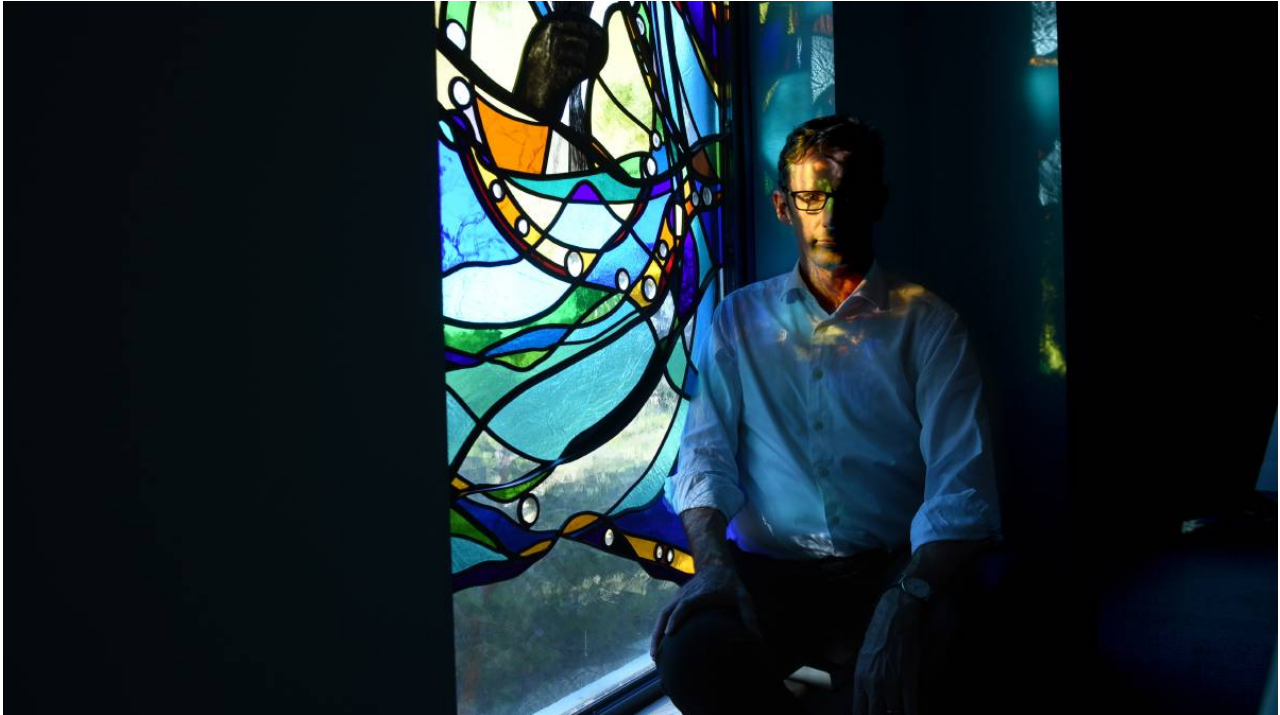
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Boys at Edmund Rice College in the 1980s knew that sexual predators moved freely among them, and would share advice about who to avoid being alone with, Throsby MP Stephen Jones - a former school captain - has revealed. In the wake of another teacher's admission of guilt over historic child sex crimes at the West Wollongong all-boys college, Mr Jones said the school had felt like a "dumping ground" for paedophiles whose crimes were overlooked by those who could have ended the abuse. "There was a whole bunch of them [paedophiles] at the time I was there," said Mr Jones, who graduated from the school in 1983. "Boys would [avoid them] in all sorts of ways. "We would just talk amongst ourselves about it - 'don't get caught with this person or that person'." Brother John Vincent Roberts was allowed to teach at the school despite at least one prior complaint of abuse at another NSW Christian Brothers school. In Wollongong Local Court on Wednesday Roberts, 73, admitted to 11 charges relating to the sexual abuse of a male student at Edmund Rice in the late-1980s. Mr Jones said classmates of his felt betrayed, decades later, to learn that the Christian Brothers hierarchy had knowingly transferred predators to the school. "It certainly seemed to us, the guys who were there at the time, that Wollongong was a dumping ground for brothers who'd got in trouble in other places and they thought they'd move them down here where nobody would complain, where their past wouldn't catch up with them," he said. "They changed schools but not their behaviour." Mr Jones attended Edmund Rice when Brother Michael Evans was principal and Father Peter Comensoli was parish priest. Evans suicided before detectives could interview him about child abuse allegations. Comensoli was jailed for abusing boys. Last month he admitted to interfering with another three boys. Mr Jones said his father learnt of abuse at the school in the early 1990s, during a commission of inquiry. "It's one of the saddest conversations I'd ever had with my father," he said. "He felt like he'd let us down, and that it was so outside of his world view of what could have been possible that he probably wouldn't have believed us." "I felt incredibly sad for him, for both my parents. They thought they were doing the right thing by their kids." With other old boys, Mr Jones has received a letter from Edmund Rice College in the wake of Roberts' plea. He is convinced the school has "changed enormously" since its darkest days. "The letter was unequivocal about condemning the behaviour and putting the interests of the kids first," he said. "It is a great shame that the leaders of the school 30 years ago didn't have the same approach." Roberts returns to court August 11 for sentencing.

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"Unlike today there were neither the processes or a language around which you spoke about this stuff." Picture: Steven Siewert

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BETRAYED: "There was a preoccupation with covering things up. They were more interested in protecting the reputation of the Brothers than they were about the safety of the kids at the school." Picture: Steven Siewert

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