THE PLAYRGROUND’S CRIES FOR HELP: MUFFLED BY JUICE BOXES AND SHAME

Feature article: 10th of May, 2063

What the students of Penrith Public vision now is not a kaleidoscope of beautiful baby blue padding with waves of pompous pink slides, but rather a droopy grotesque gravel grey backdrop with nothing but devilish red debris. Children’s laughter fades as they view what once was a playground; now a plague ground. Juice boxes, lost property, stacks of fallen chips that pigeons peck on, they all reek of obnoxious rotten egg. Littering is still constant. Pupils who before longed for lunchtime now dread it, knowing that the smell of Gordon’s leftover mashed potato would crawl **secretly** into their mouths. Yet, students i**nsouciantly climb over rubbish chaos just to go down a slide.**

**Children’s whispers and murmurs engulf the landfill site, creating imaginative stories, unaware they were the true creators of this disgusting pile of gunk. Parents listen attentively to their kids, finding out the state of the school. Many carers are disturbed, hearts shattering into mere shards of disbelief as they learn that instead of a serene, tranquil, and safe environment, the children are met by distracting beasts of litter that haunt them throughout school days. Teachers, ignorant and arrogant, neglect any accusations of horrid wellbeing procedures. Principal Corine sits, unbothered, in his office, fingers dancing on his phone. No one takes authority, every staff member wanders around, heads tilted in unison to run endlessly on a hedonic treadmill.**

**Trees that once surrounded the Penrith Public Nature Reserve bend melancholically, eyes droopy and smiles disintegrating with every lunch order thrown under its branches. Gleaming white constellations that are awoken consequently light up the dark abyss of midnight; they stare, bewildered at the immense amount of slop dunked onto every green corner of Penrith Public. The stench of mouldy bread dances into the clouds’ noses, pursuing them until they leave, with a curse in their scent identifiers. What good is a clear dazzling blue sky if the horizon is anything but beautiful? The children might twirl enthusiastically to school; but this artificial happiness is not able to lurk around anymore.**

Last Monday, a School Inspection Report (SIR) was conducted due to countless pages of complaints sent by concerned parents. Paediatrician Spark tagged along with the team, hoping to see crowds of interested students. Instead, he met children whose slouched backs and miserable faces left Spark petrified. Paediatrician Spark commented: “Wellbeing is not accounted for in Penrith Public. Severe cases of scent destruction had been found to be present in one of two students.”
Principal Corine argued: “We had a very recent clean-up. This is the result when parents don’t teach children manners nor how to properly dispose of food.”
His statement was iconic because their last clean-up was a decade ago, when he as principal was not even active in the school.

Hazmat teams were called for due to the toxic chemicals found in the life-size compost bin. Teams in full gear began testing the toxic waters of the playground, working frantically to contain the lethal lurid liquid; leachate, a clumpy sludge of bacteria. Leachate, a significant danger to children, has been irritating lungs. Leachate seeps like a villain in disguise, slinking under benches, sneaking into cracks, lurking by the seesaw. It froths in sunlight, as thick as split yogurt, with a vinegar, metal, and old-tears smell. The children call it "The Ooze." It has stolen their jump ropes, their soccer balls, even their innocence.

Children wanted to have a say about this issue.
“I used to climb the bright yellow monkey bars. Now a dead pigeon smashed against it, and there’s red paint smothered underneath it. Today’s my birthday. I just wanted to revisit my happiest moments, but I can’t.” Sadie, a year 4 student, turning 8 today, cried.

“I haven’t seen my best friend Jasper ever since. People are gossiping that maybe he drowned in the puddle of rubbish. They say the leachate hums lullabies in the night, and cradles him to sleep every day. Hehe, imagine the rubbish talking about politics.” Karl Noir, kindergartener in Class KJ laughs innocently.

The school janitor who wishes to remain anonymous states: “I used to mop up simple apple juice spills. Now I mop up regret and sanity.”

The final bell tolls, but no one rushes out eagerly anymore. Kids creep out slowly, heads hung low, backpacks dragging like anchors of despair. The bright chalk paintings that once sparkled with joy are now twisted by stains and sludge. Even the hopscotch squares quietly mourn under layers of grime.

There have been reports of "The Ooze" seeping into the staffroom, but Principal Corine says nothing. Nevertheless, his desk was found rather damp this morning. His hands, quite remarkably green.

Mums have started sewing gas masks onto school caps. Dads sit nervous circles, discussing transfers. One child asked their mum, "If I bin my sandwich wrapper, will the trees forgive me?"

The leachate didn’t just poison the ground. It poisoned the future. Some even say it’s not leachate.
It’s the playground crying black tears.