

No check on factory fears

By **STEPHEN LAMBLE**

A **GYMPIE** factory that parents fear may be poisoning schoolchildren is operating without an environment protection licence because of bureaucratic "overwork".

Department of Environment Central Coast regional manager Nigel Holmes said CSR Limited had applied for the factory to be licensed but department staff had been too busy to set safe air emission standards and issue the document.

The factory, about 600m from Monkland Primary School, has been operating for more than 20 years.

The Sunday Mail reported last week that some parents fear children may have been poisoned by arsenic in water sprayed on the school grounds and/or by fumes from the factory.

The parents said children's symptoms included bloody noses, nausea, fatigue, vomiting, sore eyes, asthma and behavioural problems.

The Department of Environment is investigat-



CONCERN: Monkland school report

ing the parents' concerns and has focused on the arsenic problem.

CSR Limited corporate affairs manager Brian de Boos said he could not understand why the Environment Protection Act licence had not been issued.

He said CSR used potentially cancer-causing formaldehyde in its manufacturing process but the company believed the Department of Environment would have told it if factory emissions were unsafe or making children ill.

"We have had no letters from them - none

whatsoever - complaining we are not doing the right thing or that our emissions are over and above what is allowed.

"Above all, we don't want something like this. If it was true we wouldn't want to be perpetuating it - God forbid."

CSR's Gympie factory manager Laurie Armstrong said very little formaldehyde escaped the factory but the chemical was largely odourless and often the only sign of its presence was burning eyes.

Freedom of Information documents show the Department of

Environment has known of concerns about the factory since at least April 1996.

The documents show:

- A complaint made on November 13, 1996 about a "choking smell" coming from the factory and a nearby resident "having trouble breathing" was not investigated.

- The department knew formaldehyde was used in manufacturing particle board; it did not know what type of formaldehyde or what other chemicals were added so it did not know what emissions to test for.

- The department was informed last March some Monkland parents were worried about their children getting sick.

- The Sunshine Coast Environment Council last March warned the department it had received 17 complaints about the factory and believed a departmental investigation was justified.

- A department official who assumed factory chimney emissions were monitored monthly was "surprised" to find they had not been checked for several years.

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