Mr Stewart Ross

“The current discussion within politics, the media and education regarding Disabilities is positive.....”

We have heard much, in the last 18 months, about the issue of Disability in our community. One very important benefit of this is that it has moved us towards an increased awareness of the meaning of Disability and its impacts on daily life. In many ways, the term might seem daunting and some may shy away from it in fear of being “labeled”. In truth, terminology is an important (if limited) means of describing an issue, accessing funding and services and raising all-important awareness of the community to the needs of the disabled (or “less-able”), due to circumstance.

For able people, the “Disabilities Issue” may appear an over-statement. Some critics suggest society is “getting soft” and that now “everyone can find a disability”. Such attitudes are probably inevitable when any new policies (especially costly ones) are introduced, or whenever our assumptions about how we do things are challenged.

For many, their disabilities are invisible to others. This does not make the disability any less challenging. In some ways it makes the issue more distressing for the disabled person and their family. The current discussion within politics, the media and education regarding Disabilities is positive because it means we are moving towards being a community prepared to bring the issue into the open and have the conversation about what it actually means, in practical terms, to experience disability. It means we are prepared to face a serious issue of equity.

Is every “disability” of equal impact or devastation? Definitely not. Like all things, there are functional implications that may be greater or lesser, depending on the nature of the issue or condition. Common sense in management should be exercised in this regard and the question of levels of functionality should be considered when resources and definitions are allocated.

In late 2012 All Saints’ received a substantial quantity of Federal funding, tagged for the specific purpose of staff professional development in the area of Disability awareness. This was part of a significant roll-out of funds, called More Support for Students with Disabilities. It is essentially designed to make schools efficient at meeting the Australian Disabilities Standards of Education.

All Saints’ was required to outline a project of ongoing professional development activities, procedures, training and awareness-raising for the duration of 12 months, up until the end of 2013 (NB: funds were not allowed to be spent on resources). A broad outline of the highlights of our Disabilities Professional Development project is set out below. Some parents in the school community received letters regarding the inclusion of their children in aspects of the project noted here. We hope you are able to appreciate that the terminology (of Disability) is not meant to be a restrictive label. We are all restricted by the limitations of language and definitions, but this does not define the level of sensitivity and professional discretion with which we approach the issue. The intent is to provide more support for your children.

**PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS:**
- Specialist Disabilities Educators & Administrators’ presentations of Professional Development Days & ongoing workshops.
- Release time for teaching and administration staff to attend Disabilities-specific conferences, visits to other schools to observe Best-Practice models.
- Mentoring of relevant staff by a Speech Pathologist, specific to the needs of identified individual students.
- Provision of IT supported literacy programme to enable staff to work more effectively with Learning Disabled students.
- Creation of a centralised school Database of Fact Sheet Alerts on Educational Impacts & Strategies, for all students with diagnosed conditions - to be accessible to all teaching staff.
- Provision of staff Mental Health First Aid training.