Hello Staff, Parents, Carers and friends,

As you are all aware, I was most fortunate in being able to attend the AASE (Australian Association of Special Education) conference in Darwin from 15th to 18th June. I left Devonport airport on the Saturday morning of the Queen’s Birthday Long Weekend and arrived in Darwin at midnight. This was my first trip to Darwin, so I spent my first day walking around the main streets of Darwin and catching the ‘Tub Bus’ to view some of the sights. The weather was fantastic – sunny and 30º. I booked a tour to Tiwi Island for the following day and travelled to this quite remote island on a six-seater single engine plane.

Tiwi Island is the home of an indigenous community of around 1500 people. At the airport, passengers are quickly reminded by a banner at the entrance that Tiwi Island is the home of several AFL football players. I was very impressed by the small committee of indigenous women who greeted us with damper cooking in the cinders of their campfires. After refreshments, these women performed their ‘smoking’ ceremony and demonstrated their basket weaving skills. A visit to the museum and school gave me some background into the history and cultural identity. This community cares for each other and has preserved their cultural heritage by developing design centres where indigenous youth learn the crafts of wood carving, pottery, painting and printing.

A visit to Tiwi Island is a truly unique experience!

The theme of the conference - ‘At the Heart of the Matter: School and Classroom Leadership’ was attended by 300 Special Education Principals
and teachers who participated in school visits, workshops and informal networking.

The theme of the conference was led by the keynote speaker, Jean Crockett, Ph. D. from Florida who stated that ‘inclusion can be a promise not a process’. She stressed the need for Principals to advocate for meaningful educational attainment for students with disabilities. We must set a direction with vision combining analysis and scrutiny. A school’s mission and goals need to be aligned with current research based on teaching and learning initiatives. Effective leadership plays a critical role distributing specialized expertise across the teams of teachers and support personnel. The term ‘Special Education’ needs to be demystified so that the stigma is taken out of intensive education.

Robert Randall from ACARA spoke of the National Curriculum containing a core of knowledge, skills and understandings that will be taught to ensure that students with disabilities attain achievable standards through ongoing formative assessment. Due to the lobbying from groups e.g. AASE & ASEPA, Margaret Lynch from South Australia and Tracey Chappell from a QLD Special School have been appointed to work alongside ACARA’s curriculum writers to ensure meaningful standards and modules are included for students with disabilities.

I visited two educational settings - Nemarluk Primary Special School and Henley Special School are both situated in central Darwin. The Nemarluk School had an enrolment of 30 students in 1991 - it now has 116 students with a waiting list. The school caters for students aged between 3.6 years to 12 years. Class groups generally consist of 5 students to 1 teacher + support staff. No specialist teachers are employed. Teachers receive 3 hrs. release time per week. Due to the growth of the school, there are 9 satellite classes in regular schools close to Nemarluk. The Special School is responsible for providing staffing, furniture, IT and teaching and learning resources - the regular school only provides the classroom.
An interesting concept!

The Henley Special School caters for students with severe impairments from 5 years to 18 years. The Dripstone High School is located across the road. The Henley Special School has developed an Outreach program on the Dripstone High site which caters for disabled students enrolled at Henley and disabled students
who have completed their final year at a regular neighbourhood Primary school. Fourteen students are enrolled in the Outreach program which operates in two classrooms with two resource teachers and several TA’s as support. These students study their core subjects in these two classrooms and also access online programs offered through the high school’s IT circuit. The students are included in regular classes for extra curricula subjects.

This outreach program remains the responsibility of Henley School although the students enrolled wear the Dripstone High School uniform each day.

It is always refreshing to visit schools in other Australian States to note alternative options to support the educational pathways of students with disabilities. I feel sure that my attendance at the AASE conference will remain a topic of discussion for some time. Sharing new insights and experiences assists to mobilise and influence others.

Grace

Congratulations to Jayde Lynch who has commenced accessing a cooking program on a Tuesday morning at Devonport High. Jayde is accompanied by Mrs Janet Coxan who supports Jayde 1 on 1 for the duration of this program.