The Victorian Catholic Schools’ Parent Body (VCSPB) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005, referencing the Discussion Paper (27 April 2015) and the Disability Standards for Education 2005 Guidance Notes.

The VCSPB represents parents of students in Victorian Catholic schools at diocesan, state and national levels, through school boards, or where none exist, through school based parent support groups.

The VCSPB supports the work of the Victorian Catholic education authorities in advancing the interests of Catholic schools and their students, particularly in those areas where parent input can strengthen the quality of Catholic school provision.

The VCSPB’s submission to the inquiry addresses some issues that are important to Catholic school parents and seeks to highlight parents’ perspectives on these. The VCSPB speaks from a perspective of parents who value education in the Catholic faith and tradition for their children, but also as interested citizens.

Throughout this document we have used the term “parent”, this term is used to include natural, adoptive or foster parents, guardians and caregivers of students.

As a parent body representing parents, who are the first educators of children, we support the current policy of developing collaborative and productive engagement between families and schools in all matters that may affect educational outcomes for students.

Ensuring that students with disabilities have access to education is an important element of community engagement in schools. We have deliberately referred to community engagement (not just parental engagement) because we believe that for the Disability Standards to work effectively the whole school community needs to understand the benefits for the individual student, their family and society in general.

The Disability Standards are written in a legalistic way to give effect to the legislation. This is not a format that works well for parents. In light of this we believe that an information booklet to support the eLearning modules for parents should be developed about the Disability Standards, the importance of a free flow of information about the student’s needs and the rights of students with disability.

This booklet needs to be provided to every family whose child is to commence primary school and secondary school. To be clear the distribution of the booklet should not be limited to families who may have a child with a disability. We all have a role to play in ensuring that the Disability Standards are complied with and this can only be achieved by providing parents and communities with full and clear information.

We believe that this booklet should cover the following:
• An explanation of the Disability Standards, the definition of disability in the relevant legislation, emphasising that the Disability Standards covers a range of impairments and are far broader than funded disabilities. It would be highly beneficial for this aspect to be explained in plain language as it is often a contentious point for schools in making adjustments and school communities accepting them.

• Information to assist parents about the information that they need to provide to the school on enrolment. We believe that it is absolutely critical that parents understand that it is their responsibility to provide information about their child’s disability as soon as practicable. This is important because without this information the school cannot plan for the child’s transition to school, make any necessary accommodations to the school environment and ensure that there is an Individual Learning Plan in place to address that child’s needs.

• Information and guidance about the level of support that parents can expect from the school when they have a child with a disability. Including providing information on the types of matters that might impact on that support (such as size of the school and whether it is a rural or metropolitan school). Whilst parents must know their rights, the booklet should be worded in such a way as to ensure a free flow of information without fear of discrimination.

• Education for the whole school community about the Disability Standards. The focus should be on providing tips on how sustainable practices can be developed to engage community and develop partnerships, the importance of equality of treatment and the benefits for the community as a whole in enforcing the Disability Standards.

The language of the booklet should be in plain English aimed to assisting the parent (irrespective of their own educational background) to understand the Standards and how they can use these Standards to obtain the best outcome for their child. So far as possible the booklet should be worded so as to encourage parents to build a strong relationship with the school and that information should be able to flow without fear of discrimination. The booklet would obviously be available in a range of languages and in audio form.

There is clear evidence that when parents feel connected, they are empowered to support the learning of their child, and able to share in this responsibility with the school.

To further aid the building of a strong relationship between parents and the schools, VCSPB recognises that schools may require assistance in understanding their obligations, supporting a child with disabilities whilst balancing the needs of all students in the school.

We believe the Guidance Notes for schools could include ways to assist schools in raising these issues with families at the enrolment stage and ensuring that an ongoing basis the needs of the child are met. Pre-service units and ongoing professional development of all teachers, in the area of the Standards and practical ways to address requirements of all students should be introduced.

The VCSPB acknowledges the importance of this review and is pleased to have the opportunity to canvass these issues amongst the Catholic school parent community and report through this submission.

Tracey O'Neill
CHAIR