



Diocese of Sale Catholic Education Ltd

Media Release

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Wellbeing in focus as schools prepare to re-open after the fires

Along with the usual back-to-school preparations, many families with school-age children are also dealing with the effects of this summer's bushfires. While some have lost property or pets, others have been affected through evacuation, or exposure to media coverage and stories about the disaster.

Director of Catholic Education for the Diocese of Sale, Ms Maria Kirkwood, said that her main focus is on the wellbeing of school communities as they prepare for the new school year.

"We are very aware that some of our students, staff and families have been through a difficult time, and we're putting a range of measures in place to assist them.

"We have been working directly with principals and our support agency, CatholicCare, to ensure that counselling is available where needed. Further training will be offered for teachers to support their students' emotional needs during the recovery process.

"Financial support will be available for families in the form of fee relief, access to uniforms and books, and we will support schools whose staff have been directly impacted by providing funds for relief staff," Ms Kirkwood said.

Families in need of pastoral or financial support should contact their principal, Ms Kirkwood added.

The Catholic Diocese of Sale covers much of the area that has been seriously impacted by fire in East Gippsland, including Mallacoota, Buchan, Cann River, Sarsfield, Nowa Nowa and Omeo.

Bishop Patrick O'Regan, Reverend Peter Slater, and Father Michael Willemsen have spent time at the Bairnsdale relief centre, while Father Harry Dyer attended the Morwell relief centre, offering assistance and speaking with the evacuees.

No Catholic school buildings or parish buildings were lost during the fires, Ms Kirkwood said.

"Schools that are within bushfire-affected areas have been assessed for damage, and will be ready for students and teachers to safely return on the first day of school.

"We are working closely with the Department of Education and Training to monitor the situation in regards to school bus routes, as many roads remain closed.

"Ongoing risks are being carefully managed. School camps and excursions that were planned for fire-affected areas are currently being re-assessed. Schools will have contingency measures in place if further evacuations are required, or if air quality deteriorates again," Ms Kirkwood said.

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