

## **Announcement of first Archdiocesan Special School Eileen O'Connor Centre, Lewisham, 19 December 2014**

Born with *Osteogenesis imperfecta*, Stella Young was ABC editor, comedian and disability advocate. Sadly, she died recently aged only 32. Before dying, she wrote a letter addressed to her 80 year old self, saying: "Difference, as you knew it then, was a terrible thing. I used to think of myself in terms of who I'd be if I didn't have this pesky old disability. Then at 17, something shifted. To borrow from Janis Ian, I learned the truth at 17: that I was not wrong for the world I live in. The world I live in was not yet right for me."

(<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/stella-young-disability-advocate-and-comedian-dies-aged-32/story-e6frg6nf-1227148155287>)

Pope Francis recently echoed this, referring to communities of disabled people teaching us to "welcome one another with our limitations, because we all have capacities, but we all have limitations too". He encouraged us to learn "to know and value the capacity that the Lord has placed in each one, truly in each one, with no one excluded!"

(<http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-says-disabled-people-create-communities-remind-us-that-no-one-is-free-of-limitations>)

With such inspirations in mind, it is my great pleasure officially to announce today a new Strategic Vision for the provision of special needs services to students in Sydney Catholic schools.

The Archdiocese of Sydney, its Catholic Education Office and its individual schools are committed to providing high-quality learning for all students, regardless of the challenges they experience in their life or learning. We want to make concrete and real the rhetoric of Church and state about the need, even right, of every child to a first class education. *Christus Pædagogus*, Christ the Teacher, taught us to reverence the dignity of

every human person as the image of God and to give particular attention to the most needy: these included the poor in financial or spiritual terms, the sick and frail and otherwise physically or intellectually constrained, and of course the young with respect to whom he said there must be no obstacle to them coming to him. Following his clear mandate, the Catholic Church has become the oldest and by far the largest education provider in the world. In this country alone we now have a growing number of early learning centre places, around 700,000 primary and secondary school desks, around 33,000 tertiary places, and many adult education and formation offerings in parishes, dioceses and other settings. Add to that the extraordinary network of church-run orphanages, children's hospitals and research centres around the world, as well as health, welfare and aged-care provision for those of us who are a little older, and there can be no doubt that the Church walks the talk about reverence for every person and care for those in need.

But we could always do more and one area that we have been particularly aware of is in the education and other support of children and young people living with various disabilities. I would like to see us at least as present and more so than government and other charities in this space. And so I am especially pleased to announce that part of this new Strategic Vision of Sydney Catholic Education Office is to establish our first dedicated "Special School" for secondary students to be located here at the Eileen O'Connor Centre in Lewisham. It will open in 2016 and will be a specialist facility for educating students with moderate intellectual disabilities and complex learning needs. This is only part of a bigger plan to help other schools give high-quality support to students with disabilities through satellite classes and services all around the Archdiocese. We are also looking seriously at establishing a base primary school and further satellite classes.

The presence of so many of our church and education leaders today is testament to how important we all consider this arena of provision. I understand that federal and state Members of Parliament were to attend but couldn't due to the changed time; nevertheless I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the federal and state governments who provide considerable assistance to us in the provision of education to all those families who would like their children to come to our great Catholic schools.

I also acknowledge Fr Michael McLean, Chairman of the SACS Board; Fr Gerry Gleeson, Parish Priest of St Thomas a'Beckett Parish, Lewisham; staff of the NCEC and CECNSW; Mr Greg Whitby, Executive Director of the Catholic Education Office Parramatta Diocese, with whom we will, along with the Dioceses of Broken Bay and Wollongong, continue to collaborate closely in the provision of disability education in greater Sydney; Mr Frank Malloy, Regional Director of Marist Schools; Dr Georgina Reybhout, Principal of St Lucy's Wahroonga, Mrs Linda McNeil, Acting Executive Director of the Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT; representatives from Our Lady's Nurses for the Poor; staff from the Australian Catholic University and the University of Notre Dame, Australia and the assembled media.

This week has been marred by very disturbing events in the heart of our city. We are not used to hearing words like 'siege', 'hostages' and 'security forces' associated with our metropolis. I have just come from an Interfaith Memorial Gathering to pray for the victims and their loved ones. We are also mindful of the shocking attack by the Taliban on a Pakistani school, which left 132 students dead. The risk is that such events will make people more cautious, more suspicious of their neighbours, or even incline people to turn on each other in accusation and recrimination. Projects such as this one are demonstrations of a very different vision for our country, one that reverences every human life and keeps expanding the circle of those who are embraced. It is a project in renewing and enlarging our social capital at a time when we very much need such signals. I commend Dr Dan White, Executive Director of CEO Sydney, the

other directors and staff of the CEO, and our great principals, staff and parents, for this. A week out from the great Feast of Christmas, when the Wisdom of the ages became incarnate as a fragile little baby and chose to grow up as a child and young person who Himself needed educating, this new Strategic Vision and new school offer beacons of hope and love for all children and young people. God bless you and your loved ones in the holy season ahead!