

A SCHOOL LIBRARY FOR KIDS WITH DISABILITIES

Located in the Sydney suburb of Wahroonga, St Edmund's College is a high school for students with cognitive impairment and, in many cases, other disabilities such as sensory impairment, Down syndrome and autism. The college has 130 students and the curriculum is all Life Skills from years 7 to 12. The school's aim is to prepare students for life beyond the school gates. CATHY D'APICE, teacher librarian at the school, tells us more.

The library at St Edmund's (also known as Eddie's) College is always a hive of activity, from before school starts until students go home. It has a small, diverse collection with both fiction and non-fiction sections, including monographs, graphic novels, picture books, DVDs, magazines and an online magazine. In 2015, an ebook collection was added. The library uses Oliver library management software for its OPAC.

Set up so that up to three classes can use the space comfortably at the same time, the library also has a class set of PCs and iPads. Many of the activities incorporate blended learning along with differentiation for specific student needs, including voice output software.

'Our collection includes braille, large print and audio books, either as part of class tasks or for leisure reading.'

In collaboration with the classroom teacher, students are taught how to locate, organise and present information for small projects and class tasks. The library program also encourages students to enjoy literature, which is essential for the development of literacy skills.

Students engage in leisure and social activities and, where necessary, are encouraged to use their communication devices – Proloquo2go, NOVA chat and Vantage Lite. It's a library that encourages chat over silence! There is also a space where they can enjoy downtime, before school or during their lunch hour.

The library can be seen as a hybrid of junior and senior school libraries. As the school doesn't offer the mainstream HSC, there is no need for a large reference section, online databases or more demanding non-fiction monographs.



Cathy d'Apice, Teacher Librarian at St Edmund's College, and students Sean and Joe

Our collection includes braille, large print and audio books, either as part of class tasks or for leisure reading. The school has a staff member who specialises in converting books to braille format. Students also have access to the State Braille and Large Print service, and some students qualify for DAISY readers and audio files from Vision Australia. The library also houses some realia for these students for things such as games and maps that are made for sensory use.

One of the greatest challenges the library faces is finding books that are attention-grabbing and interesting but are pitched at a lower literacy level. The books that are marketed as such mostly have less text, but less text per se – without paying attention to vocabulary – won't necessarily make a book more suitable for those with lower literacy levels. Reading programs are often very prescriptive and, for the most part, uninteresting to teenagers. Graphic novels are another genre that our students quite enjoy but there is often too much happening on the page for students to comprehend.

Every student has the right to have access to information and to expect that the school will provide them with the skills needed for lifelong learning. 'The soft bigotry of low expectations,' as lawyer and former Disability Discrimination Commissioner Graeme Innes has described it, is not acceptable at Eddie's. A suitable library for students with special needs is one way of ensuring success in their education. It is also hoped that they will be inspired to use libraries for their leisure and community access beyond their schooldays. 🌟

CATHY D'APICE

Teacher Librarian

St Edmund's College, Wahroonga, NSW

dapice@stedmunds.nsw.edu.au