On the contrary, special provisions for exams are fair

FIRST WORD

The Herald again quotes John Kaye as saying the Higher School Certificate's special examination provisions program offers "unfair advantage" ("No 'special' haven for selective schools", March 11).

On the contrary, special provisions attempt to remove disadvantage for students who cannot otherwise make a fair attempt at HSC and School Certificate exam papers. Both the provisions and the Board of Studies application of the provisions meet the requirements and standards of the Disabilities Discrimination Act (1992) and stand up to independent audits.

The Herald continues to air a position that the special provisions provide an unfair advantage. Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact that some schools have a larger number of students with genuine disabilities than others does not mean the system must be corrupt. The natural extension of this position would be that any variation on a state average was suspect.

Accusations of bias are insulting to students with disabilities and their families, as well as the professionalism of teachers in government and non-government schools. The Herald is aware that the program has been audited by the chartered accountants Walter Turnbull and the former head of the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, Jan Keightley.

In some government schools 20-30 per cent of students received special provisions, and the same proportion of government and independent schools applied for special provisions in 2008.

Selective reporting of the types of disability where special provisions were applied for is particularly unfair to the students involved. Diabetic students, pregnant students and students suffering from juvenile arthritis are among those who apply for special provision.

The "sweaty palms" mentioned in several articles on special provisions relates to a rare condition called palmar hyperhydrosis, which can cause students to sweat so much that paper tears under their writing hand. The provision granted may well be a hand towel.

Students with disabilities who complete school deserve praise, not insinuation and ridicule. The special provision program is fair. It avoids expensive medical certification, removes disadvantage and meets the principles of legal and social justice.

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Brian Croke executive director, Catholic Education Commission
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