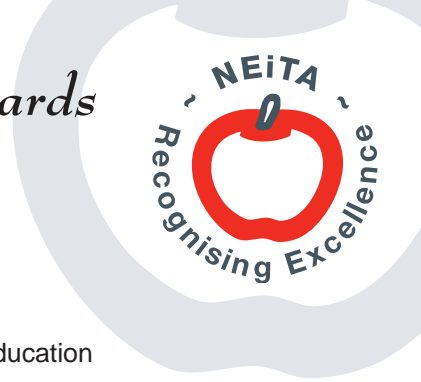


# NEiTA 2009 ASG Inspirational Teaching Awards

## State and Territory Award Recipient



## Diane Phillips

Diploma of Education (Primary), Graduate Diploma in Special Education (Intellectual Disability)

**Strathewen Primary School, Wattle Glen, Victoria**

Nominated by: School Council

*Position: Class teacher • Category: Primary • Level taught: Prep to year 2 • Years teaching: 27 years • Years at this school: 1.5 years • School type: Government • Town/Suburb: Wattle Glen • State: Victoria • Postcode: 3096*

### Why teaching?

I grew up in a small rural community, in a big family. I always enjoyed being around the young children of my older siblings. Subsequently, I decided to pursue primary teaching as my career.

Over the years I have found myself increasingly drawn back to smaller rural schools, such as Strathewen Primary, where strong family and community involvement is fundamental in educating children. I enjoy watching all of my students learn and reach their potential. Their progress and enthusiasm in turn inspires me. I still simply love teaching children.

### Creating a classroom sanctuary in a time of trauma

On 7 February 2009, the Black Saturday bushfires devastated the small rural town of Strathewen. The death toll for local residents was approximately 15 per cent of the entire population. Nearly all families were left homeless or displaced, and newspaper reports at the time described the town as being like a war zone. Although the primary school was destroyed, amazingly only four days after this devastation, Diane Phillips had her classes up and running in a temporary classroom space in nearby Wattle Glen.

Diane realised the importance of keeping up a routine for her young students in their time of loss. She made sure that her classroom was a safe and reassuring place for them. She modified her teaching programs to enable students to work through the trauma they had just endured. Even though most students had lost their family homes and/or were living in temporary accommodation, they were seeking normality - so Diane made sure that every child had a reader to take home (despite the limited resources that were available initially), and ensured school life was as 'normal' as possible under the circumstances.

Diane nurtured and guided her pupils through this difficult time. She always took time to hear the students' individual thoughts and stories and helped them to debrief emotionally. Diane assisted her students to cope with the trauma of the bushfires by integrating the children's questions and thoughts about what they had experienced into natural classroom conversations. She slowly worked through the issues with the children and helped them to come to terms with the situation. She also worked closely with child trauma experts to assist students.

In the aftermath of the bushfires, Diane also liaised closely with parents to monitor the children's responses. This was aided by the fact that, before the fires, she had already developed strong links with the school parents and wider community. Despite the circumstances, each week Diane's classroom still has parents and grandparents actively involved in a range of activities such as reading, knitting, sewing and science.

It is a testament to Diane's dedication that, after the bushfires, her class attendance levels did not drop. Parental satisfaction surveys and student benchmarking criteria have remained very positive. In a time of great loss and trauma, Diane has managed to create a sanctuary in her classroom where students continue to thrive, as they feel safe and supported.

#### Contact details:

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