The week following Tropical Cyclone Marcia, music, arts and craft, board games, sports and an endless supply of ice blocks were all part of the school day for students attending Catholic schools in Rockhampton, Gracemere and Yeppoon.

Tropical Cyclone Marcia crossed the coast just north of Yeppoon on Friday (20 February) leaving a trail of destruction in Yeppoon, Rockhampton, Gracemere and surrounding districts.

Catholic schools and colleges affected by the event included Sacred Heart Catholic Primary School and St Benedict’s Catholic Primary School in Yeppoon; Emmaus College, St Anthony’s Catholic Primary School, St Joseph’s Catholic Primary School (Park Avenue), and St Mary’s Catholic Primary School in North Rockhampton; The Cathedral College, St Peter’s Catholic Primary School and St Joseph’s Catholic Primary School (Wandal) in Rockhampton and St Paul’s Catholic Primary School in Gracemere.

Despite widespread power outages and extreme heat and humidity Catholic schools reopened on Tuesday, February 24, with a modified program to assist families trying to get back on their feet after the impact of the cyclone.

Catholic Education Director, Diocese of Rockhampton, Leesa Jeffcoat, said some parents were required to return to work or attend to urgent recovery matters and having the option to send their children to school was of great assistance.

“In particular, it was important for those parents employed in essential services or working in the recovery effort for the general community to be able to send their children to school,” she said.

Staff ensured students were engaged in supervised activities, were well hydrated and remained in shady, well-ventilated locations to cope with the hot daytime temperatures.

Miss Jeffcoat said schools had remained closed on the Monday immediately following the cyclone as communities rallied to assess damage, clear debris and ensure school grounds and buildings were safe for students and staff to return.

“Staff and parents responded very generously in extremely trying conditions after an invitation was distributed via local media for anyone who was able to report to their local school community at 9.00am on the Monday after the cyclone to assist with the clean-up and help restore school and college grounds in order for them to be safe for staff and students to return,” Miss Jeffcoat said.

Daily updates were provided to the respective communities via local media outlets, Catholic Education Website and Twitter regarding school operations to enable staff, parents and students to be informed of the recovery process as schools and college communities returned to normal operations.

As power was restored schools resumed normal operations with most schools offering regular programming progressively during the week with all schools returning to their full operation on Monday 2 March.

Miss Jeffcoat expressed her sincere and deep gratitude to all staff, parents and students in school communities and to the wider community in general for their generous response in assisting with clean-up operations last week.

“It was very physical work in oppressive heat and humidity and everyone has done an incredible job restoring our schools to welcome back our students and staff,” Miss Jeffcoat said. “We are aware that many staff and families put aside their own considerable hardships to help and we are extremely thankful for their assistance. We continue to hold those affected staff and families in our thoughts and prayers,” she said.

Miss Jeffcoat advised parents who may be concerned about children dealing with the psychological and emotional effects of experiencing a cyclone to contact their school principal as families can access professional counseling services through Catholic Education.

“We would also like to acknowledge the outstanding work of our emergency services, Ergon Energy, military personnel, the various local Councils and community organisations who have worked so tirelessly during this recovery period. The workload on the people in these organisations has been immense, and we in Catholic Education recognise the enormous contribution they have made to the Rockhampton and Yeppoon region in very difficult circumstances,” Miss Jeffcoat said.

“Catholic Education has been supported throughout the natural disaster by colleagues from Catholic Schools and Catholic Education Offices across Australia and the many messages we have received have been of great practical assistance. I also extend our sincere appreciation to the Queensland State Government, in particular, the State Minister for Education Hon. Kate Jones, and our colleagues in the Department of Education with whom we have worked in close cooperation for the coordination of our recovery efforts” Miss Jeffcoat said.