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Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
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Per email ewr.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Submission to the Inquiry into Primary Schools for the Twenty-First Century (P21) Program

I am pleased to present on behalf of the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) our submission to the P 21 Inquiry.

NCEC is the peak body representing Catholic schools in Australia. NCEC does not directly conduct schools, nor does it receive any Commonwealth schools funding. It functions to complement the work of State/Territory Catholic Education Commissions by advising the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference on national education policy and programs, and by managing the liaison at Federal level with ministers, shadow ministers, policy officers and the department.

Introduction

1. NCEC has carefully monitored the Building the Education Revolution (BER) programs in general and the P21 program in particular. The impact of P21 on Catholic primary schools has been extraordinary. The program has directly improved the learning facilities for 380,000 Catholic primary school students, about 55% of the total Catholic school enrolment. Even more marked is the P21 impact on Catholic schools, with building programs at over 1,200 Catholic primary schools and over 120 Catholic combined primary/secondary schools. The positive impact of the P21 program has thus been felt in 92% of all Catholic schools.

2. NCEC believes that P21 has more than amply fulfilled its purpose. It has been a powerful economic and employment stimulus in local communities at the onset of the global economic crisis. It has enabled the completion of major primary school infrastructure projects, many of which were beyond the financial capacity of individual schools. It has effectively involved Catholic school communities in their local school. It

has provided the means whereby the teaching and learning programs in all Catholic primary schools are strengthened and thus staff morale improved and student learning outcomes consolidated.

Conditions and criteria for funding

3. Catholic school authorities and communities appreciated the need for conditions and criteria in this program. The conditions and criteria were satisfactory, and gave ample scope with the necessary flexibility for local schools to address educational as well as building needs and to tailor projects to suit their particular situation, including their available land and their existing school facilities.

4. P21 funding priorities and projects approvals were managed by the Catholic Block Grant Authorities (BGAs). Most Catholic primary schools have master plans for the extension and refurbishment of their facilities. BGAs were thus able to rely in the main on school principals to develop their own P21 building plans, while some BGAs also provided templates that were helpful to principals in isolated and remote areas.

5. Contrary to some media reports, there is no evidence of Catholic schools using P21 to unnecessarily duplicate existing facilities or accept unwanted facilities or building templates.

Local contractors

6. Most P21 school projects were able to make full and exclusive use of local contractors.

State Governments

7. Catholic school authorities and school principals greatly appreciated the willingness and capacity of State Governments (in all but one state) to fast-track P21 building planning. The work of State Coordinators-General was also very effective in resolving planning conflicts and ensuring smooth and productive project approval procedures.

Timing, budget

8. The planning and construction timeframes were extraordinarily tight. Catholic BGAs were able to use the administration funding to employ additional temporary staff to aid schools with project development, to process applications and to deal with routine clerical and financial matters. The enthusiasm and commitment of school principals also contributed strongly to P21 meeting planning and construction deadlines.

9. There were concerns about cashflow in more than one Catholic BGA at different stages of the P21 project, and NCEC expresses its appreciation to DEEWR for their prompt and effective response to alleviate these concerns.

Signage

10. NCEC notes that Catholic school authorities could foresee no issues with the signage requirement, as the P21 requirement was almost identical to the general Commonwealth Government Capital Grants program signage agreement with Catholic BGAs.

Program management

11. The DEEWR management of the program has been of a high standard. While some Catholic BGAs thought that DEEWR should have availed itself early on of the existing capital grants expertise within the department, or developed a better understanding of how the building industry works, these were minor issues in the wider context of DEEWR's frequent, proactive and effective email correspondence, tele/videoconferences and face-to-face meetings with BGAs, and the equally frequent caucusing, both face-to-face and by email and teleconference, of the Catholic BGA officers themselves.

12. Catholic BGAs are disappointed with the decision late in the P21 program that reversed an earlier decision to allow BGAs to use unspent admin funds to assist with unforeseen school projects overruns. This has been particularly difficult in Round 3, as tender prices have tended to become marginally less competitive as work in the building trades picks up overall.

Summary

13. The P21 program has been of enormous assistance to Catholic primary schools. In the traditional context of very tight school capital budgets, P21 has delivered much-needed facilities and has boosted staff and school morale.

14. P21 worked well in Catholic primary schools because principals and school communities were able to accept ownership for the carriage of their projects.

15. Having three rounds of P21 was helpful.

16. DEEWR handled the pressure of tight program time frames very effectively. DEEWR flexibility with project completion dates was helpful. Catholic schools achieved the program deadlines to a very large extent.

17. The wide-spread use of local contractors was crucial and most beneficial.

In conclusion may I express, on behalf of the National Catholic Education Commission, our appreciation for the P21 program and the other BER initiatives. NCEC believes P21 has had an impact on Catholic schools well beyond the initial economic stimulus purpose.

For their part, the Catholic BGAs have done a first-class job implementing the program, clearly demonstrating the advantages of a devolved school system management structure.

Catholic primary principals, too, and school communities (experienced as most of them are in developing and managing building projects) have also been a significant factor in the success of P21.

NCEC is aware, of course, of the ongoing buildings and facilities needs of Catholic schools across the country. We believe that the deferred review of maintenance of capital expenditure will show Catholic schools are beginning to address but still face considerable building needs to meet the demands of a twenty-first century curriculum and pedagogy.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Therese Temby".

Mrs Therese Temby
Chair