

## **Submission to the Senate Inquiry**

### **Primary Schools for the Twenty First Century**

Giant Steps Sydney is a School of a Prescribed Kind, located in Gladesville NSW catering for students with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder. The current school enrolment is 60 with an age range of 3-18 years of age. The school charges no fees and relies on the extraordinary fundraising efforts of the parent body.

The school has a strong focus on inclusion and works with a view to transitioning students to regular school environments. For a number of students this option is not the most beneficial and these students will spend the majority of their schooling years in a specialised environment. For Giant Steps one of our priorities is to create educational opportunities for students with very challenging behaviour and high support needs.

The school employs teachers, as well as a range of therapists - music, speech and occupational who combine under a transdisciplinary model of service delivery to create innovative programs and to use their combined knowledge to solve some of the significant issues facing students and their families.

The Federal Government's Primary Schools for the Twenty First Century program for our school has been a fundamentally positive in a range of areas. The new spaces created and re-furbished have meant an increase in the quality of the programs we can now deliver, it has also minimised the risks to both staff and students given that spaces are now designed to assist students with significant behavioural challenges. We have been able to pay attention to good design in a special school environment that was previously unavailable to us due to the costs.

The project has also assisted the school in dealing with problems associated with heritage listed buildings and having the opportunity to up-grade has put the school approximately 10 years ahead of the planned capital works program which focused on creating a manageable school environment.

#### **1. The conditions and criteria for project funding**

The condition surrounding the short time frame for the completion of the projects was not a problem. The seven month period to complete the project once commenced is a very short period however we feel this will be achievable in our case. The timeframe has meant there has been a very dynamic response which has focused our attention intensively and drawn us together as a school community.

The Council DA proved to be a more lengthy process than we anticipated which was compounded by heritage issues on the site. There was however good will on all sides (school, local council and the AIS) to expedite the process as much as possible.

Our site requirements matched very closely with funding criteria in terms of our needs.

As a special school our funding limit was \$850,000 based on student enrolment numbers. This is not a good indicator of the scope and size of our school especially in terms of staff numbers and other accommodation requirements for students with autism given the behavioural issues and the needs of our students.

The heritage issues on our site created additional expenses especially in regard to infrastructure (plumbing and electrical) and the need for additional costly architectural advice and heritage impact statements relating to buildings built during the mid 1800's.

## **2. The use of local and non-local contractors**

All local contractors have been used during the project and a substantial number of apprentices have been working on the site. Approximately 50 tradesmen have been involved in the project. There have been no major issues relating to the team of workers employed.

We ran a significant, competitive tender process and there has been an exceptionally high level of commitment from all involved to complete the project on time and within budget.

## **3. The role of state governments**

The State government has not played a substantial role in the process. Local government has been extremely supportive. Our school sits outside the jurisdiction of the NSW Department of Education and Training and as an independent school we are a member of the AIS. The AIS has managed the BER funding applications and provided support in a very responsive and well organised manner. The AIS ran briefing sessions, provided support and information relating to accountability, managed financial reporting and provided on-going advice and support as needed.

## **4. Timing and budget issues, including duplication**

Budgeting issues have not been problematic. The initial 50% of the funding was received as the project commenced. There is a requirement to closely manage our cashflow as the final payments of the project need to be expensed. We do not anticipate a problem in this area however a preferred payment schedule would have been 50% initially, a further 25% before completion and the final 25% upon completion.

The seven month time frame is tight but achievable. We anticipate full completion within the required time. This has been achievable due to the access we have to professional services, support from the AIS and we have maintained full control over all projects.

## **5. Requirements for school signs and plaques**

This is such a minor matter. It is difficult to understand why this should be the concern of a Senate Inquiry.

## **6. The management of the program**

Management of the program has been hands-on from the School Board, School Executive and professional services involved in the project.

We had full control of the process and have been able to plan and design spaces that will service the needs of students with autism in a very real way. As issues arose with the projects we have been able to make decisions quickly to avoid hold-ups. We have conducted on-site meeting twice a week with the architect, builders and other professionals as required. The architect has remained fully involved in the management process and has communicated well with all concerned.

Staff were involved in the decision-making process which has led to an increase in staff morale and a sense of ownership of the school. Staff have a greater sense of pride in their environment which reflects very positively on workplace practice and outcomes for students.

Managing day-to-day issues of a building site within a school environment has at times been challenging. We have at times employed additional staff to manage students, timetables and behaviours as a result of disruption. However, the positive effects far outweigh any issues around management of the building program.

The school has enjoyed full support of the AIS throughout the entire project. The AIS appoints an independent architect to ensure compliance around buildings and funding.

The funding has provided facilities that otherwise would not have been possible given our reliance of fundraising to meet regular on-going staffing expenses. Our experience of the entire funding program has been a very positive one and we look forward to fully utilising our new facilities.

**Kerrie Nelson**  
**Principal**  
**30 October 2009**

**Claire Allen**  
**Administrative Director**