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**INQUIRY INTO PRIMARY SCHOOLS FOR THE
TWENTY FIRST CENTURY**

**SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE EDUCATION,
EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS COMMITTEE**

FROM

THE INDEPENDENT EDUCATION UNION OF AUSTRALIA

Introduction

The IEUA is a federally registered union representing more than 65,000 members in non-government education, predominantly in registered primary and secondary schools.

The IEUA is the principal union with coverage in the sector and maintains exclusive coverage of principals and teachers. We represent every class of employee including persons employed by educational authorities responsible for the administration, support and co-ordination of systems of schools.

Member response to Primary Schools for the Twenty First Century

Following the announcement of the inquiry all branches were invited to contribute to a centrally co-ordinated response survey aimed at providing a simple descriptive collation of member awareness and reaction to the program. Most responses addressed matters (a) (iv) to (vi) of the matters set out by the Committee. Responses can be summarised as follows:

- Members were overwhelmingly supportive of the Primary Schools of the Twenty First Century element of the government's Building the Education Revolution initiative and concerned that the inquiry may have been initiated in an attempt to roll back school building programs or retrospectively vary the terms on which schools were able to participate in the program
- Members maintained no objection to the project signage requirements which were perceived as no more nor less onerous than those established by the previous government in respect of its targeted spending programs or currently in operation as a co-commitment requirement of funding in respect of other government programs
- Members generally had the opportunity to be part of the planning process through standing consultative committees at the workplace particularly in the Catholic sector
- There were no recorded complaints to the union by members of any adverse effects of temporary relocation as a result of construction activity at the workplace including adverse effects relating to teaching and learning conditions and outcomes for students

- There were no reports of members suffering workplace injuries as a result of construction activity at the workplace
- Members directed the majority of their comment to the improvements in student learning environments resulting from the construction of new classrooms and libraries. In this context many members also commented on the positive effect on the school community of meeting and working in new buildings for the first time in the living memory of all associated with the school.
- Members working in school administrative services commented on a temporary increase in workload as a result of the reporting and compliance requirements of the program. In this context members also reported the implementation by employers of new and streamlined processes for the engagement of additional casual staff, access to TOIL and the working and payment of overtime and penalty rates.

Member responses to the program however were not limited to those elicited by the union as a result of the establishment of the inquiry. There was widespread member concern earlier this year in response to allegations of unnecessary spending associated with the program aired in the media.

Reflecting these concerns the union's Federal Secretary, Chris Watt, issued a press release on 19 June this year broadly reflective of member views then and now which stated in part:

IEUA members have welcomed the opportunities that this funding makes possible and, while acknowledging the additional demands and workloads that these projects place on schools, non-government school teachers and support staff recognise the uniqueness of the opportunity. IEUA Branches are working in a spirit of cooperation and partnership, in consultation with employing authorities to ensure that the best possible outcomes are achieved for all participants in each school community.

Feedback from IEUA members reveals that where concerns are raised by school communities, in relation to operational issues and function, there is evidence that the parties, including the Australian Government, are working cooperatively and with flexibility, sensitive to the needs of school communities, to ensure that the best possible outcomes are achieved.

The fact is that all Australian schools have a role to play in rolling out the Australian Government's stimulus package and it is clear that the non-government sector has seized the opportunity, in partnership with the Australian Government, to ensure that the full potential benefits to the Australian community are realised.

It would be most disappointing if political advantage was sought to curtail this opportunity as a consequence of alleged operational issues in a State bureaucracy. It would seem more prudent to have all parties working in a cooperative fashion in support of each school community.

Other Related Matters

Branches reported that there were two primary reasons for the level of member interest in and support for P21.

Obviously an overwhelming majority of employees in non-government education also choose to educate their children in Catholic or Independent schools. Previous polling over a considerable period of time has identified member perceptions of declining real funding from all government sources as a significant industrial issue. In the Independent sector in particular there has been a sharp increase in member concern and activism over, inter alia, funding associated with special needs students and, importantly in this instance, capital investment. A high level of awareness from members that funds available under the program were available equally to all schools was a significant contributor to a high level of support in Independent schools particularly middle fee schools.

Secondly many member responses concentrated, as summarised above, on the benefits to students of what were perceived as once in a career opportunities for change.

P21 will ensure that more Primary School teachers than at any other time are teaching in buildings designed in and for contemporary learning. It is axiomatic that students need a healthy and stimulating environment in which to learn. Members commented variously that:

- New planning and design principles have incorporated educational considerations for the first time
- Students were consulted in respect of decisions significant to them such as the replacement of school sporting facilities
- Until this project linking behavioural objectives to spatial needs has been an impossibility and at the margin of capital investment considerations owing to the necessarily piecemeal nature of building improvement and replacement
- Healthy and comfortable buildings increase student participation, enquiry and achievement
- The need to comprehensively examine projections for student spatial learning needs in itself drove a new program of analysis of learning space design principles which for the first time involved students and the community
- The new building process in maximising energy savings, light and

ventilation has provided a core learning opportunity in social responsibility for students

The union's survey was brief and necessarily anecdotal and limited as a result. In our submission the committee in its deliberations, quite aside from the budgetary and management issues set out in the matters referred for report, should use the opportunity to gather information as to the educational benefit per se of the changes in learning environment occasioned by the project. The committee on the other hand has an important opportunity to make recommendations for further survey work on the benefits delivered by the program to Australian students.