



Queensland Catholic Education Commission

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SUBMISSION FROM THE
QUEENLAND CATHOLIC EDUCATION COMMISSION
TO THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO
PRIMARY SCHOOLS FOR THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

INQUIRY INTO PRIMARY SCHOOLS FOR THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

This submission is from the Queensland Catholic Education Commission (“the Commission”). The Commission is the peak body representing all Catholic Education authorities in Queensland which together operate 287 schools. The Commission is also the approved school system for the purposes of the Schools Assistance Act 2008 and the Queensland Catholic Block Grant Authority for the purposes of Section 83 of the same legislation.

The Commission acknowledges the prime goal of the Building the Education Revolution (BER) is to have a major stimulatory impact on the national and local economies through the building of new school infrastructure and the refurbishment of existing infrastructure. The Commission is not in a position to measure the effectiveness of this goal but at the time of preparing this submission notes that the tender market remains competitive which suggests that without BER there would have been significant adverse consequences for the building industry in Queensland.

The Commission also acknowledges the complementary goal of providing facilities for 21st Century learning. It is pleased with the Government’s decision to recognise the school education sector as one which would benefit from the economic stimulus package. The improvement to building stock for Catholic schools in Queensland will have long term benefits.

The involvement of Block Grant Authorities (BGA’s) to deliver the Government’s agenda for the non-government school sector has allowed the Commission to utilise proven processes and procedures to deliver the Government’s BER program. Queensland Catholic education authorities operating under the BGA have generally elected to utilise the traditional project delivery method of engaging a supervisory architect and seeking competitive project costs via a selective tendering process. Authorities and the BGA believe this method has worked well in the past and will continue to deliver cost effective outcomes under BER. The Commission also observed that the process facilitated the involvement of local communities in the decision making processes which on the whole, does contribute to better outcomes.

The Inquiry sought particular comment under the following headings:

(i) The conditions and criteria for project funding.

In relation to use of funding, the guidelines indicated funding can be used for capital expenditure on the following items (in order of priority):

1. construction of new libraries;
2. construction of new multipurpose halls (eg gymnasium, indoor sporting centre, assembly area or performing arts centre) or, in the case of smaller schools, covered outdoor learning areas;

3. construction of classrooms, replacement of demountables, or other building to be approved by the Commonwealth; or
4. refurbishment of existing facilities.

If a school applies for funding that is not the first funding priority (ie a library), it must provide reasonable explanation for why it is not seeking funding for a library or for any other capital item which is higher in the priority list above. For example, schools with recently constructed, contemporary libraries and multipurpose halls could apply for the funding for the building of other facilities, or refurbishment of existing facilities.

The Commission notes there was flexibility to choose appropriate facilities but believes the philosophy behind the “lock-step” decision making was unnecessarily cumbersome and that schools and their communities should have been given greater initial choice of facilities to contribute to improved educational outcomes and learning for their community.

(ii) The use of local and non-local contractors

Using the traditional delivery method referred to above, builders that are local and non-local have an equal opportunity to tender for projects. The manner in which successful builders engage contractors and sub-contractors to deliver the various trades to facilitate construction is builder specific. Our knowledge of the industry is that builders do have a strong preference for engaging local contractors as this is the most cost-effective strategy. Successful tenders on P21 projects to date have been builders from the area in which the school is located.

(iii) The role of State governments

- The Co-ordinator General in Queensland has involved the Commission in several meetings relating to the progress of BER. The Commission provides regular reports to the Co-ordinator General on progress of projects.
- There are regular meetings between officers of the Department of Education and Training, Independent Schools Queensland and the Commission. These meetings are essentially to discuss issues of mutual interest relating to the delivery of BER projects.
- The State Government has put arrangements in place to fast-track the delivery of infrastructure facilities under BER. Under the arrangements, schools are exempt from the Local Authority planning scheme process. This process has historically proven to be a significant contributor to delays in projects and also a significant cost imposition in terms of contributing to the cost of infrastructure services. The exemption from the planning scheme process was welcomed by the Commission.
- The State Government has offered the Commission access to building contractors particularly where they are operating in remote areas. This offer has not been taken up but the Commission wishes to take this opportunity to acknowledge the generosity and goodwill of the State Government.

(iv) Timing and budget issues including duplication

The Commission acknowledges the need to stimulate the building industry quickly and by mid October 2009 38 projects had started construction. The Commission however, had raised concerns about the proposal to amend the requirement to have all Round 3 P21 construction started by 1 December 2009. The nominated completion date for Round 3 of P21 is March 2011 and on the basis that a \$3m project will generally not take longer than 6 months to construct, it is difficult to understand the rationale for the earlier commencement date. Some compromise has been offered in that projects are to "commence"* by end of October 2009 or if this timeline is not met then schools will be required to "start construction"** by 1 December 2009.

There will be ongoing budget issues for most schools in terms of increased recurrent costs such as electricity, insurance, cleaning, maintenance, etc.

(v) Requirements for school signs and plaques

The Commission acknowledges the right of sponsoring governments to require signs and plaques. The requirements of the BER program are closely aligned to those for the Commonwealth General Capital Program and other specific one-off capital programs that have existed in the past.

(vi) Management of the program

The Commission believes it is managing the program efficiently and effectively. The magnitude of the program is significantly greater than any existing or prior capital programs but the Commission is able to scale up its operations using proven systems.

The management of the program having regard to DEEWR's responsibilities appears to have been made more difficult by a limited understanding of the operation of the building industry.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while particular issues are raised in this submission, the Commission acknowledges and is grateful for the improved facility outcomes for Catholic primary schools in Queensland as a result of the Building the Education Revolution program.

* **Commence** is deemed to imply an action post design that incurs a cost.

** **Start construction** is deemed to be continuous construction activity on the site.