

**Submission to Senate Inquiry:
Primary Schools for the Twenty First Century – Building the Education
Revolution Scheme**

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I hold the position of School Council President for the Courtenay Gardens Primary School situated in Rosebank Drive, Cranbourne North, Victoria. This submission has been tabled at the School Council Meeting held on 26 October, 2009 and been ratified for submission by the Council.

Courtenay Gardens Primary School had been allocated \$3 million under Round 1 of the above federal government economic stimulus initiative. For a considerable time one of the goals of the school management has been to have a full sized gymnasium built. As we have worked towards this we have had building designs drawn up and costed. These designs were made to the specifications that the school staff and community decided would meet the needs of the school and ensure that it remained a valuable asset into the future. The costing that had occurred in September 2008 including change rooms, offices, stage, retractable seating improved access and was 250 square metres larger than the current project came and was costed at \$2.5 million

I was not involved in the application process for the BER funding, however from conversations with school staff it appears that this process was difficult to understand with conflicting information received federally to what was coming from the State of Victoria Education Department. It appears that although the school qualified for the funds control of this funding and the project was overtaken by local bureaucrats within the education department who have little interest in the needs of the school itself.

On having the announcement made that we would be included in the first round of this funding it quickly became apparent that the Victorian Education Department would centrally manage the projects. The difficulty with this decision is that for ease of management the Department decided on standard designs for the buildings and we were left with only one option of a multipurpose hall that we could obtain. Efforts by school staff to have our previous design considered were fruitless.

From my perspective the consultation with the school community has been non-existent and the dealings with school staff directive and authoritarian. Taking into account the needs of the actual community that will utilise the building has been negligible.

I have been informed that the design of the multi purpose hall that we have been presented with has been estimated by local sources at 1.7 million. It is interesting to note that the size of building is smaller than the local project I referred to above yet appears to be significantly more expensive. The contract as detailed on the website <http://www.workingvictoria.vic.gov.au/projects/courtenay-gardens-primary-school-new-construction-of-multi-purpose-hall> states that the contractor S J Higgins Pty Ltd is charging \$3 million for the works. I find this difficult to accept.

From the outset we have had difficulty having any local involvement. The contractor has failed to listen to the experience of school staff in relation to issues such as electrical system capacity and the history of flooding on the site selected (the contractor has since learnt from this experience to the detriment of the project, and no doubt further expense). We had to fight to have any say in the colors and fittings of the building and fixtures – originally we were given a minimal number of options. We have always attempted to ensure all building works on site remain in keeping with the style of buildings in place – in this instance we have not had this option. No suitable plans for the building had been received until the week ending 23/10 when we discovered the new construction did not even have a stage. On viewing the plans it is apparent that the school will be forced to make major alterations over time which will incur further expense. This situation is farcical when this planning is underway before construction has commenced. Of particular note is that the site, as it is also for community use, faces the roadway. This combined with our security fence restricts student access. Our pleas to have suitable access for the school use incorporated into the plans have been ignored.

I have attempted to have some involvement in the process and after raising some issues with a Member of Parliament in relation to some issues I received a message CC to the Principal and myself from a Michael SMALL (Assistant Regional Director, Southern Metropolitan Region, Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development) who within stated “[Could I also respectfully remind you that the builder has control of the building site and that the department is the builder and not you or your school council.](#)” Further attempts to contact this individual and discuss local concerns and get information have been met with silence. The contempt shown for the local community and staff has been staggering. We still have no definite deadlines for any stage of the construction.

Further issues created by the project involve the relocation of portable classrooms to accommodate the multipurpose hall. This took in excess of 10 weeks causing major disruption to a number of classes. Specialist classrooms were forced to house these grades and resulted in limited capacity to continue these specialist programs. Equipment from these rooms had to be stored in the old small hall preventing its use, impacting on hiring agreements with community groups and delaying another building project to refurbish this building into a performing arts centre.

Of the relocated portables only one has been given wheelchair access, despite all previously having this access. Due to our lobbying we were recently (23/10) notified that disabled access will finally be restored to all the relocated classrooms. Crushed rock was incorrectly laid as pathways – causing many issues until we could finally get the project managers to agree to provide concrete paths which will finally occur on October 30th. Covered walkways to the locations where the portables once were have been torn down and the project managers refuse to reassemble them at the new locations – citing no funding available. The BER project managers of the Education Department also refuse to include this in the works undertaken. This is clearly unacceptable to the school community and needs to be rectified as a matter of urgency.

The “works” have been very slow to progress. At this stage only site preparation work

has been undertaken, despite some 16 weeks elapsing. The contractor appears to have a number of projects of this nature and tradesmen are moved from one site to another creating time delays for all sites – my belief was that local contractors were to be used, yet it appears only a select few will get work.

The decision by the Victorian Education Department to centrally manage these projects is resulting in a standard design for buildings that will all look the same regardless of the local requirements or aesthetic appeal of the area. The ability of the Education Department to effectively communicate with schools has been demonstrated to be poor, resulting in confusion and frustration. It is interesting to compare this project with the works Courtenay Gardens is undertaking to convert our old small hall into a performing arts centre. As this is managed by the school itself we have had direct involvement with the contractor and found that they have been helpful, able to provide advice and suggestions while catering for our needs. The speed of the works is vastly superior to the large (and presumable better resourced) company contracted for the multipurpose hall under the centrally managed process. I note that Catholic and Independent Schools in Victoria are managing their own projects and it would be interesting to know if any of these schools have an issue with the process.

I respectfully request that I be informed of the result of the inquiry and in particular any aspect that relates to the issues I have raised in this submission.

Issues requiring urgent resolution at Courtenay Gardens Primary School:

1. **Inclusion of suitable access for school use;**
2. **Reassembly of covered walkways at relocated classrooms;**
3. **Provision of information to the school on funding allocation (how much is remaining?)**

Yours sincerely

Nathan PROWD