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Ms Lyn Beverley
Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
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Dear Ms Beverley

Thank you for providing the opportunity to submit a response to the inquiry and report by the Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee regarding the Federal Government's Primary Schools for the 21st Century program (P21); one of three elements of the Building the Education Revolution (BER).

In my capacity as the Minister for Education and Training, I submit the following in consideration of the Federal Government's P21 program, with particular reference to items (i) to (vi) outlined in the information about the inquiry, as follows:

(i) The conditions and criteria for project funding

Through advice from the Northern Territory (NT) Department of Education and Training (DET) on the progress of the implementation and delivery of the P21 program, I am satisfied with the conditions and criteria for project funding.

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) has finalised the BER budget for states and territories. The NT government schools' share of the P21 program for new or upgraded

primary school facilities is \$173.05 million and \$49 million has been committed to the non government schools.

Overall, the benefit across the NT education system is substantial and exceeds the capacity of the NT Government to provide this level of upgrade and new facilities to every school in the immediate future.

There are some categories of education delivery that were ineligible for direct funding, including Homeland Learning Centres (small school centre on outstations) and the NT Music School. However, the enrolments for these centres were included in the overall funding for the NT schools. Further, remote schools were eligible to include secondary enrolments in the overall enrolment count where more than 80% of the students are Indigenous. The overall total investment and consequential benefit to primary schooling including our remote schools has been substantial.

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

The NT Government's response to the BER has been to encourage local contractors by following existing procurement guidelines to ensure a value for money approach. The procurement framework applied to P21 projects provides a weighting for local development, consistent with the capital works management of NT funded projects.

It is anticipated the inquiry will attract responses from industry wishing to comment on the extent to which the objective to stimulate the local economy has been met. From an NT perspective, it is apparent there has been a positive impact in terms of current and future construction activity.

(iii) The role of state governments

The NT Government's implementation plan included establishment of a system of governance, communication, consultation and project management to deliver the P21 program. Cooperation from industry and across the NT public sector, together with guidance and ongoing support from DEEWR has resulted in a successful start up and implementation to date. DET has expressed satisfaction with the level of involvement and flexibility afforded to manage the P21 at a systemic level, while being able to respond appropriately to the unique demographic of the NT's schools student profile, as well as the geographic disbursement of our schools.

(iv) Timing and budget issues, including duplication

The objectives of the stimulus package required a creative approach to meet tight timelines and new ways of doing business were introduced and supported by stakeholders. Initially, there was some underestimation of the

time needed to design, document and tender projects and this has resulted in some completion dates being slightly exceeded on a number of smaller projects in earlier rounds.

However, the NT fully expects to deliver the P21 within the overall timeframe and completion date of March 2011.

The timelines around the earlier rounds and smaller projects would have been met had there been a greater 'bank' of standardised designs. The NT did not have the benefit of standard designs for facilities such as assembly halls and libraries. The uniqueness of the NT's portfolio of schools required a high level of consultation and a considered design response in order to achieve value for money while also meeting the requirements of the Building Code of Australia.

Overall, the benefit to the NT is substantial and I am advised the level of innovation and cooperation between governments, industry, schools and their communities will ensure projects are completed by March 2010.

(v) Requirements for school signs and plaques

In terms of the \$223 million in infrastructure spend and consequential benefit to NT schools, the NT does not have any issue with the need to erect signs and attach plaques to completed projects. To date, there have been no complaints received by my department in relation to this requirement.

(vi) The management of the program

The provision of 1.5% of the program which totals \$2,595,750 for the government schools sector has enabled DET to manage the implementation of the program in partnership with the NT Department of Planning and Infrastructure. The NT Block Grant Authority is successfully managing the delivery of the P21 program for non government schools, on the basis of the provision of the 1.5% allocation for this very purpose.

There has been ongoing interaction with officers from DEEWR to manage issues, variations and challenges, both at an officer level as well as through national teleconferences and face to face meetings with all jurisdictions represented.

In summary, the BER P21 program has provided a once in a lifetime opportunity to add infrastructure capacity by way of new libraries, halls, classrooms and/or upgrade existing facilities to cater for the learning needs of children into the future. The NT education system has embraced the initiative with every school

participating in the program (other than those that are under consideration for merger or closure in which case the funding was re-allocated in the NT).

I am advised that all schools have indicated they are satisfied with the level of consultation undertaken and the types of projects being funded under the initiative. Naturally some of the smaller schools would like more funding and some could argue a higher need compared to the large urban schools that received the highest level of funding. However, overall every school will benefit from the program by way of additional and/or upgraded infrastructure.

At this early stage, it would appear that the aims of the program to provide economic stimulus through the rapid construction and refurbishment of school infrastructure and build learning environments to help children, families and communities participate in activities that will support achievement and develop learning potential has been well received and successful.

Yours sincerely



PAUL HENDERSON

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