



**DONALD PRIMARY SCHOOL NO. 1465**

Principal: Mr. Danny Forrest

Thursday 22 April 2010

To whom it may concern,

It gives me a deal of satisfaction to explain the situation of the Donald Primary School and the debacle that is Federal Government's Primary Schools for the 21st Century program, (BER). I never went into this whole process trying to cause any issue with any politicians of government staff, because I thought this would be the best federal Government Program with the biggest impact since the start of compulsory schooling over one hundred years ago. Never have I been so disenchanted with a large sum of money.

From the outset I believe my school council and wider community have been disappointed with the outcomes offered to our school. Below I have listed our issues with the BER process. We basically didn't want to waste any tax payers' money when clearly works could be completed on time, cheaper and with more beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders. All along we have just wanted the opportunity to have someone listen to our school's story and make a common sense judgement that would benefit the Donald Primary School, the local economy and ultimately the Victorian State Government.

**(i) Conditions and criteria for project funding.**

We have no real issue with the funding model put forward by the Federal Government; it is a great concept with a lot of positives for most schools. I would like to add that there is a lot of difference when comparing a school of 50 children to a school of 150 children yet we are still in the same funding bracket. This year even though work has not started we have a confirmed enrolment of 152 children thus making us eligible for the higher bracket. I can understand and acknowledge that you must have a cut off mark, but a smaller school runs 2- 3 grades where we run 8 grades.

From the early days we were overjoyed at such a grant amount however this all came crashing down when the Victorian Government brought in its templates designs and a one size fits all approach. We were offered a building structure of 3 classrooms with an open learning space. The classrooms are smaller than what we have already got. We have talked to every level of government but our pleas always fallen on deaf ears. To put it in basic terms and cold hard facts at the Donald Primary School:

- We currently have 15 learning spaces (classrooms areas) that we can utilise each day. Currently we operate 8 classrooms of a morning and 7 of an afternoon.
- Catering for an enrolment of 152 students.
- Original weatherboard school built 1874, 1880's Brick Building, 1912 School becomes Higher Elementary School, 1960 Becomes Primary School as High School on new separate site. In a state of disrepair and going downhill quickly.
- The Donald & District community are 100% behind our plans.

We basically don't need any more learning spaces as we cannot maintain the ones we have already. With 19 class spaces we will be able to have one room for every 8 children! Our school is 135 years old weatherboard with 1874 original classrooms still in use. If required I do not mind sending photos of my school buildings. Below we have listed our current offers to the State government to try and change to a more suitable plan. Options were presented and rejected last week.

**Option 1:** The Donald Primary School **preferred option** is to work with the BER team and upgrade/modernise and maintain our existing facilities. We are willing to work with SKM designers and project managers for this to happen.

**Option 2:** Replace the old three roomed developmental play centre with a standard DEECD sized building **i.e. similar ones used for rural replacement in BER for schools under 50**, if we are able to spend the remainder of the allocated funds on the main building and in particular a modernisation of our toilet block.

**Option 3:** We are happy to build a community centre on the site with the money that has been allocated instead of new classrooms i.e. build a multipurpose, fitness, health and wellbeing facility for school & community use.

**The cold hard facts are:**

- 15 Learning spaces why do we need 4 more?
- The main building is 135 years old and is in desperate need of some attention. The money could be better spent on our main school building as this then insures that the facility will be viable for the 40 plus years, thus making it a win-win for us and the State Government.
- In the end we only wish to have a common sense approach applied, to get the best outcome for the Donald Primary School and community.

**(ii) Use of local and non-local contractors,**

We have a local commercial building contractor in our town who has worked on numerous large scale government building projects from, hospitals, schools, fire stations and nursing homes. He even helped us with our 'Big Shed' project that we conducted 2 years ago. A 720 square metre building for under \$400,000.00, yes it is true! We have been disappointed not even being able for him to directly tender for our project, considering he is handling Catholic school projects in the district. We were shut out from the start so we were very disappointed because early in the program we designed a building with him that could have been completed, \$200,000.00 under budget, more space and something that fits into our older style school. We would also have removed 4 – 6 older style learning spaces from our current site.

**(iii) Role of state governments,**

In a word, terrible, difficult to deal with, frustrating from the outset, I blame the whole mess on the Victorian State Government for the way in which they have acted in the "Secret Squirrel" way. We are asked to be transparent, open, and accountable but they will not repay the favour. As proved with the previous Investing in Our Schools Program, the Federal Government made a great decision to trust schools and communities with the funding to create great outcomes. We were able to turn our \$150,000.00 into \$400,000.00 project with local support.

It is also frustrating that the State Government usually lets Principals run building projects however this time they have added in architects and project managers to take a double wack of money before a sod has been turned. They have also held the money at a State level thus earning interest, money of which would usually pay for landscaping and variations. The States argument of wanting us to focus on teaching and learning is incorrect. It is safe for us to 'supervise concrete pours' when it suits them, and then all of a sudden they want total control.

**(iv) Timing and budget issues, including duplication.**

Timing well the tight timeline was a huge failure; we could have at least had something started and most likely finished!

We made many phone calls, had an early site meeting, sent numerous emails, and had discussions with every level of Government. We protested from the start that this was not an ideal project outcome for the Donald Primary School. However in the end it was my 15 minutes of fame in the media that got things moving. It is very sad to think that I have to be on the front page of The 'Australian' newspaper to have some action. Surprise, surprise after two days we even had some positive signs about our new project as the state BER team were able to meet with us. At least we could put our case forward. We are more disappointed that we could use local tradesmen and save money for the government rather than be ripped off and not even seen a budget breakdown. The excuse of the tender process is still in place and this is a very weak argument for us not allowing us to see a budget breakdown. We are very unhappy that we do not have any input into the \$850,000.00 being spent where and how. Apparently our project went to tender twice and came back twice over budget and then the design was changed into a module design.

**(v) Requirements for school signs and plaques.**

No real issue, it is a part of all government funded programs. The sign will not go up until we know what is actually happening!

**(vi) Management of the program;**

If we were able to work with the Federal Government without State interference and a once size fits all approach this program would have been the best ever. However to coin a football phrase 'Looks like Tarzan, plays like Jane,' this program promised the world yet has failed to deliver. A huge opportunity missed for everyone. All levels of government like to pride themselves on community consultation. The school council with limited information were forced into special meetings and were made to make decisions based on ever changing options. 'Where is the consultation in this? Yes after a delay I did sign the acceptance of a very limited building design for my school under duress, as I was told sign it or miss out! That was over 8 months ago and only last week the project managers finally started to talk again.

**(b) Other related matters.**

Further sticking points:

Why the program was so differently administered from state to state and why were Independent and Catholic schools in Victoria allowed to have a say in how the money was spent. They could design purpose built facilities to suit the needs of their schools.

In my personal view as an Australian tax payer, I think that because of state government excess and doubling up of fees, designs and project management, double tendering and the like, it has cost our country in excess of \$3 billion dollars that could have been better spent.

I am willing to speak to anyone about my schools situation. I am also willing to speak in person to whoever needs to hear my response or is interested in my views.

Yours sincerely,

Danny Forrest  
Principal  
Donald Primary School