

Submission to the Senate inquiry concerning the Federal Government's Primary Schools for the 21st Century program

Thank you for this opportunity to provide this submission concerning the BER Primary Schools for the 21st Century' program. This submission may be made publicly available.

Mount Evelyn Christian School (MECS) is one of 75 Christian Education National (CEN) schools throughout Australia. It is nestled in the foothills of the Dandenong Ranges on the outer eastern fringe of Melbourne. It has 550 students from Prep to Year 12. MECS was eligible for \$2 million under the BER P21 program. With this funding and some of the school's borrowings we are constructing a gymnasium/multipurpose hall.

At the outset we would like to express our appreciation for the significant investment the federal government has made into all schools across Australia. Even though the rationale of the investment was a direct response to the Global Financial Crisis, our school community commends the choice of investing in school infrastructure.

The system under which MECS operates in its receipt of federal capital funding via the Independent Schools Victoria Block Grant Authority (BGA) suits our purposes very well. When funding was announced the school's leadership in consultation with teaching staff and the school community developed the design brief for the school's architect (with whom we have a long term relationship). The architect then completed concept plans and provided quantity surveyor costings. Subsequently, working drawings were provided to known and trusted local builders; and a competitive tender process followed.

Our project is a gymnasium/multipurpose hall with an overall area of just over 1600 sq m. It includes two basketball courts and line marking for other sports (1020 sq m), male and female change rooms and toilets (116 sq m), a rock climbing wall (86 sq m), a stage area inc. back stage (129 sq m), foyer (36 sq m), extensive storage (112 sq m), one general learning area (60 sq m), a kitchen (24 sq m), an office for physical education staff (25 sq m), and water storage for harvested rain water. We anticipate that our project will be completed in December 2010, ahead of the P21 deadline for Round 2 projects.

The outcome for our school community will be most successful. To illustrate this outcome we've included photographs of our partially completed project, along with some plan diagrams.

One of the difficulties created by the rapid roll out of the program was the inability of local council, in our case the Shire of Yarra Ranges, to process the planning permit application in a timely manner. We were at risk of losing funding if we could not start the project by a particular date. The planning permit process simply could not accommodate the program's timeframe. We received excellent support in this from our local councilor, Mr. Tim Heenan, but ultimately the planning officers seemed unconcerned at the possible loss of funding. Last minute special planning regulations put into place by the Victorian State government allowed us to bypass the inertia of the local planning process. Planning permission was expedited by direct action from the State minister for planning.

One particular aspect of the program was the cause of significant anxiety for our residential neighbours. That aspect is the requirement that facilities be made available to the community. While we fully understand this condition, in our context our residential neighbours imagined a scenario in which a small residential road would suddenly be inundated with traffic for sports competitions,

parties, community gathering and the like. Such an imposition on a small residential road is clearly not in their or our best interests. In fact one of our neighbours subsequently moved away. In the process of meeting this condition we will have to account for our neighbours' sensitivities in the amount of access available.

This project has been costed at \$2.27 million and is so far running very close to budget. We will contribute around \$270,000 of school funds for the building and the school community is raising funds of approximately \$100,000 for equipment. It appears to us that there is significantly greater 'value for money' achieved here at MECS in comparison to schools that had less or no local control of the implementation of their P21 project. We note that greater freedom and local empowerment was afforded by the previous government's 'Investing In Our Schools' program, even though the amounts were considerably less.

We were pleased that the initially mooted restrictions on having to use set design templates were not imposed on us (as it seems to have been for State schools). We were also satisfied that we were not required to use designated contractors. Both of these things seem to diminish local autonomy and empowerment and run many of the risks of the poor use of public funds that have been so clearly outlined by the Australian newspaper over the last months.

In general we would commend the system under which we were allowed to operate. It could be summarized as:

- Local autonomy, empowerment, creativity, and effectiveness
- Competitive tendering with known local builders
- Appropriate transparency and accountability mechanisms
- Minimal bureaucratic interference and removal of some bureaucratic processes

We would humbly submit that local school leadership is in the best place to assess and respond to local needs. Where there is greater restriction of local control, there is a diminished measure of local empowerment and effectiveness.

In summary,

- Congratulations to the Minister and the Federal Government for its commitment to all Australian schools.
- Please consider the very positive experience of the Mt Evelyn Christian School community as a model for future ways in which local school communities can be empowered to best respond to local needs.
- The ways in which community access to P21 facilities is enabled must respect local conditions.

Respectfully submitted,

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