

Senate Committee Inquiry

12 May, 2010

Dear Senators,

My name is Jason Barlow and I am the School Council President for Berwick Primary School. I wanted to take this opportunity to enlighten the Senate Committee of the unfortunate experience of the Berwick Primary School in direct relation to the BER program.

Berwick Primary School was built in 2003 and was one of the last in Victoria to be built with a gym that is a third of the size of a full size gym. It was policy of the State Government at the time that all school gyms be built in this way, however three months after the Minister signed off on the project this policy was changed, providing all newly constructed schools with a full size gym. At the time and well before construction had commenced, we applied to the Minister for our plans to be amended, however this was denied.

We are a school in one of the fastest growth corridors in Australia with a current enrolment of 788 students. Berwick Primary School is entitled to \$3 million under the BER program and we were looking forward to putting this money to good use within our school. Our number one priority was to extend our gym. At the initial meeting with the Regional Network Leader, the school was advised that we could not extend our gym as part of Rounds 1 or 2. We believed that extending our gym would have best served our school and local community and, as we are still in contact with our school architects, the building process could be expedited and achieved within the required timeframes. As the gym extension had always been in the school's plans, land was left vacant to accommodate this.

Unfortunately, the only way for the school to acquire a full size gym meant selection of a 1050sqm multi-purpose centre from the templates. To position a building of this size would have required the removal of our basketball court which has recently been covered by a shade sail, funded by our school community at a cost of \$60,000. Obviously, with a school of this size, the basketball court is widely used for school sporting activities, the Federal funded Active After School Communities program and the local community. We were advised that if we do not select a building, we miss out! As we believed this to not be in the best interest of the school, we selected a multipurpose centre designed for a school within the 151-300 enrolment band.

This building will provide much needed space for our vast number of extra-curricular performing arts programs. What it will not do however is alleviate the problems with facilitating a physical education program for 35 grades of students each week as well as many other sporting and extra-curricular activities. In addition to this, Berwick Primary School runs an Out of School Hours Care program which cares for up to 100 students before and after school, on curriculum days and during holiday periods. With a large number of working families, the demand for care in this area is high and we currently have a waiting list. This program is currently facilitated through the use of our gym which, at its current size, limits the choice of activity and number of students able to participate at any one time. The program caters for students aged 5 to 12 with vastly different interests. A full size gym would enable the program to offer a more diverse range of activities for our students as well as facilitating enrolments for those families currently on the waiting list.

I would also question the process put in place for accepting the building. An email was sent to the Principal on 13th May 2009, at 9:10am requesting that the form, which was attached, be signed and returned by 12 noon that day. As I'm sure is the case with most Principals, our Principal is often in classrooms with students, meeting with parents, etc and does not always receive her emails straight away. A phone call was made by Steve Wishart at approximately 11:50am advising that if the form was not returned by the deadline that the school would miss out. This was the first time the school knew about the email. Subsequently, a mad rush followed to open the email, print the form, sign it and fax it back before the deadline. I question why the school was given less than 3 hours to return a document that was only sent on a day that had such a significant impact on the school? Why was this not sent a week or at least a day earlier? I shudder to think what would have happened if our Principal was away from school at a meeting and was not contactable.

We then sought approval through the BER to have a companion project with the remaining funds from the \$3 million dollar allocation as we did not believe the building would consume the entire allocation of money. The project we wanted was to extend our existing gym. This is when our trouble started. We were advised that by selecting a building from a lower enrolment band meant that we would only be entitled to that respective band's entitlement; in this case, \$2 million dollars. This was not made clear at the selection time and even if it was, why would a school be penalised for selecting a building that would fit in on the available land? We were then advised that the building cost would not be disclosed. After three attempts to obtain the construction costs, we decided to go to the local media to highlight our situation as we thought something did not seem right here. The media had the construction costs confirmed by the government at \$2 million dollars. We received a letter from Julia Gillard stating that companion projects are able to be completed with left over funds and with the approval of the Federal Government. The problem is that as the construction cost had been confirmed at \$2 million, it meant that there would not be any money available to extend our gym. This was not the news we were hoping to hear!

We had the building estimated by the original architects of the school at approximately \$750,000, well short of the \$2 million quoted by the Government. We also had the gym extension estimated at \$650,000. So, if Berwick Primary School was allocated the full \$3 million dollars and was able to design and control how the money was spent, we would have achieved what the school requires for approximately \$1.4 million dollars, and would still have \$1.6 million to put to other projects. Sadly this is not the case.

To put this into perspective, the building we are receiving is approximately 350m², has toilets and some internal walls. This equates to \$5,700 per m². Based on our estimates for the same building, we could have achieved a building cost of just over \$2,000 per m². Where is the comparison in that! Where is the value?

As part of the BER, it is my understanding that non-government schools were not subjected to the same rules and constraints as government schools. The non-government schools had their allocation of funding transferred into their bank accounts and could allocate it as they saw fit. I do not understand why Berwick Primary School was not afforded this same treatment.

We have written letters to Julia Gillard, explaining our situation and requesting that she come and talk to us about how we can rectify what we see to be unfair treatment. To date, Julia has refused to come and speak with us. We approached federal opposition MP Jason Wood almost a year ago to assist us by applying some pressure on the government in Parliament. Jason has highlighted the plight of BPS in Federal Parliament to Julia Gillard and challenged her to come and talk to us, yet she still refuses.

Channel Seven approached us a few weeks ago to do a story on the BER and how it is not delivering what it was intended to do: provide schools with the best possible outcome. It also highlighted the roting in relation to construction costs. We accepted the offer and the story went to air on the program; Sunday Night on 11th April. The following Monday, Julia Gillard announced a task force to investigate the BER and the method in which it has been delivered and managed. This task force has come at a cost of \$14 million dollars.

We fear that the task force will not deliver any direct benefit to our school, but will only advise that the construction costs were in excess. The BER program to date has already blown out by \$1.5 billion dollars, and it has 2 years to go before all projects are completed. We therefore do not believe there will be any money left over to extend our gym.

The school has decided that we need to show Julia Gillard the BER program did not deliver the best outcome for our students and community. We made the considered decision to front the national media and hosted the leader of the opposition Tony Abbott last Monday at the school to show him first hand the reckless spending by the federal government. We wanted to try to get a satisfactory outcome for the school. If we fail in the process, it will be many years of fund raising before our school can afford to pay for the gym extension out of its own finances. This is about providing our children with the best possible environment in which to learn.

Yours sincerely

~~Jason~~ Barlow

School Council President