



Catholic Education Commission

Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn

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Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: INQUIRY INTO 'PRIMARY SCHOOLS FOR THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY'

The Catholic Education Commission for the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn (CEC) appreciates the opportunity to lodge a submission to the Senate Committee Inquiry into the Government's *Primary Schools for the 21st Century* (P21) element of the *Building the Education Revolution Program* (BER). The CEC presents this submission on behalf of the 13,000 students in 27 Catholic Systemic schools in the ACT and the 7,000 students in 28 Catholic Systemic schools in the NSW sector of this Archdiocese which form part of the NSW Catholic System.

The CEC is very appreciative of the opportunities provided by the *Building the Education Revolution Program* to develop contemporary educational facilities for the long term benefit of our students.

Yours faithfully

Moira Najdecki
Executive Secretary

Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee Inquiry into Primary Schools for the Twenty First Century

The CEC is most grateful for the funding provided by the Commonwealth under BER. It will provide much needed buildings and refurbishments for the benefit of our students.

The following comments are provided under the headings of the Inquiry's terms of reference:

The Conditions and Criteria for Project Funding

Primary Schools – Funding for P21 projects is restricted to primary schools or schools which include a primary element. Secondary schools are excluded from a large infrastructure, non-competitive element of the BER. Many secondary schools have similar capital needs to primary schools and funding would provide economic stimulus in the same way as primary school projects.

Maintenance of Capital Investment - It is noted that the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) is currently re-considering the reporting arrangements for non-government schools in respect of need for schools/systems to maintain their current and planned future capital investment. The CEC requests any such reporting be at the System level rather than for individual schools consistent with the variable nature of major capital expenditure in individual schools.

Sustainable Building Practices - The CEC supports the need to incorporate sustainable building principles into P21 projects. However, there is an expectation that sustainable building practices extend beyond the already stringent requirements imposed by Section J of the Building Code of Australia which will add significantly to the cost of construction.

Access to the Community - The CEC accepts that one of the objectives of BER is to build learning environments for children, families and communities and supports the condition that multipurpose halls funded under the P21 element of BER be made available to communities at no or low cost. However, the extension of this condition to libraries is a concern. Firstly, the resources within a school library are funded by the school community and opening them to the public presents a risk of loss of or damage to those resources. Secondly, a contemporary library is likely to be integrated within the school. As such, opening them to the public presents a potential unacceptable security risk for the school.

Priorities – The BER Guidelines identify priorities for the use of P21 funding which appear to have created the misnomer in some quarters that schools must build libraries or halls. The CEC believes that there is sufficient flexibility within the program to allow schools to build or refurbish to their immediate needs where they can demonstrate they already have a hall or contemporary library. The CEC appreciates that the program also recognises the emerging need to establish early learning centres in schools.

It should be noted, however, that the program is targeted and is restricted to a maximum of two projects per school. As such, there will be a continuing need for government capital funding support to ensure that school infrastructure properly supports the curriculum.

Financial Viability - The BER Guidelines state that non-government schools will be assessed in accordance with DEEWR's *Financial Health Assessment Framework* (FHAF). It is assumed that the recent concessions applied to the FHAF conditions for school systems also apply in respect of BER funding. It is the system responsibility to distribute funding among its member schools on the basis of need and to ensure the financial viability of schools within the system. System schools should not be individually assessed.

Reporting Requirements - The CEC accepts the need for regular reporting on project progress and other matters relating to the BER.

The Use of Local and Non-Local Contractors

Every effort is made to attract local builders and contractors to P21 projects. However, their acceptance must be balanced against the need for probity and value for money in the tender process. All successful building contractors for P21 projects in ACT Catholic System schools are local contractors and are engaging local sub-contractors. In the NSW schools for which this office is responsible, most of the building contractors are local to the particular region and all are engaging local sub-contractors. All contractors won the projects on a competitive tender basis.

The Role of State Governments

The ACT Government has been very supportive of the BER Program and moved quickly to streamline the planning approval processes through the relevant government agencies for BER projects.

Timing and Budget Issues, Including Duplication

The timelines established under the BER Guidelines are challenging, but achievable. The CEC recognises that the BER is first and foremost an economic stimulus package. However, in terms of the P21 timeframes, the project commencement conditions did not give sufficient recognition to the time required for community consultation, project documentation and planning for those projects where a design template was not suitable. Some flexibility in the commencement date could be achieved without adversely affecting the expected project completion date.

The priorities established for the Program are considered sufficiently flexible to avoid any duplication of facilities.

Requirements for School Signs and Plaques

The requirement for school signs, plaques and opening ceremonies is no different to those applied to any other Government capital program over the last several years.

An advantage of the requirements within the BER Program over other capital programs is that the Commonwealth is providing the plaques and signs rather than them having to be purchased from project funds.

The Management of the Program

An independent, joint AIS/CEO Block Grant Authority operates in the ACT. The CEC is therefore a step removed from the management of the program by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations so is not in a position to comment on this matter.