

## **Submission from Colbinabbin Primary School Council to the Standing References Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations**

Re: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Program

Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide this submission.

Consideration of the federal government's Primary Schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century program, with particular reference to:

### **The Conditions and Criteria for Project Funding**

We believe that the equity and fairness of the conditions and criteria for project funding were extremely adequate. However, how these criteria were applied across the different educational regions in Victoria were not equal and fair. In the Loddon Mallee region, we are aware of 4 small rural schools (ranging in size from 14 students to 40 students), who were denied their funding, when it was stated by both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister that all schools were eligible for funding according to their size. Who made the decision to deny these schools funding is unclear, but it sends a very strong message to their communities that the Department, and/or Region don't see them to be viable school communities in the long term. The funding these schools were to receive seems to have been allocated to other schools who received funding in excess of what they were entitled to according to the set criteria. In a neighbouring Region where the criteria were applied fairly, most of the projects in small schools have been completed within, or very close to the expected timelines.

### **The Use of Local and Non-Local Contractors**

The aim of the program was to provide economic stimulation through the provision of jobs, but local 'approved contractors' seem to have been squeezed out of the process through the way the Victorian Education department (DEECD) has bundled the contracts together. This has meant that large city based construction firms have been awarded the contracts, with the subsequent money leaving local areas. In our situation, the project manager of the firm awarded the contract has indicated that local suppliers will be given the opportunity to tender for some of required jobs, but without any guarantee of success. Using local project managers and construction firms from the department's approved list' would have several benefits:

1. Local people would be employed, spending their money locally, thus creating more local employment.
2. Any rectification issues could be dealt with much quicker

## **The Role of State Governments**

We believe that the State Government's decision to apply a 'one size fits all' model without any local consultation re local issues was fraught with danger from the beginning. Local schools know what is best for their school, and unfortunately, we were not given the opportunity to express our views. We were presented with two options, and informed by regional personnel that these were our only choices.

1. Band I Type C Rural Replacement template
2. 5 Mod Relocatable Building

Both of these options required the demolition of two of our existing classrooms – to be replaced with either of the two options – and the demolition of the original school building that dates to 1916, and which is in sound condition. The School council's decision to retain the original school building and to elect option 1 would have required our existing administration building to be relocated 3.8 m to the east. Even if we had elected for option 2, the administration building would still have had to have been relocated. A large amount of locally raised funds was spent on our just completed building works, and this would have been wasted if either of the two presented options proceeded. We believe that the following question needs to be asked;

If the State Government wants to have total control of the project, (as reported in the Australian on April 15<sup>th</sup> 2010, then why has our principal and School Council subcommittee spent countless hours on the process?

## **Timing and Budget Issues, Including Duplication**

Colbinabbin Primary School was allocated \$600,000 for the project, of which \$480,000 was allocated to for the actual building, with the remainder allocated as Project Management fees and furniture and landscaping allowances. The notion that the entire project, (and other factors that were not considered due to a lack of consultation – relocating a fibre optic cable and Telstra router) would fit within these cost parameters was, and still is, fanciful thinking. Fortunately, common sense has prevailed, and we are now having a total refurbishment of our existing buildings. We have been informed by our project manager that the same amount of money still needs to be spent on our refurbishment, and we have concerns that we and the government will not get value for money. School Council is extremely appreciative of the fact that the refurbishment will provide the school with excellent facilities, but is extremely frustrated that over the lack of transparency on specific costings.

Will there be an independent Quantity Surveyors report completed prior to the project proceeding to ensure both the government and the school receive value for money?

As a School Council, we have been extremely frustrated with the delays in the process. We were initially informed by our Regional Office in May 2009 that we were to be included in Round 2 of the BER. Communication with our appointed Project Manager indicated that works would commence on 01.08.2009 following the completion of the tender process, agreement on the scope of works and a builder being appointed. It is now April 2010 and we are still waiting.

### **Requirements for School Signs and Plaques**

We have been informed that our funding is a mixture of both Federal and State money, but the sign we have been allocated only mentions that the project is funded by the Federal Government. We don't have any problems acknowledging the source of funding through the display of a temporary sign and a permanent plaque on the refurbished building, but believe that all sources of funding should be acknowledged. Is the Victorian State Government is using federal funds to complete its promise of renewing or rebuilding every state government school by 2016?

### **The Management of the Program**

We have had concerns regarding the planning delays and the progress of the project. There have also been times where there have been unacceptable delays in responses from our project manager for information that we requested. This has led to the school community becoming increasingly frustrated. We believe that project managers should have been instructed by DEECD to communicate with schools on a regular basis, even if this was to report that there has been no progress since the last communication. As previously mentioned, the lack of initial consultation also led to delays that we think were avoidable, and this led our school community to the conclusion that we were being pressured into taking something that was going to provide us with modern facilities, but at the same time, reduce the amount of teaching and learning space that we currently have.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to your inquiry.

Tait Hamilton

School Council President

Colbinabbin Primary School