

**Submission by Catholic Capital Grants (Victoria) Limited to the
Parliament of Australia
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
in relation to the
Australian Government's Primary Schools for the 21st Century Program.**

Introduction

Catholic Capital Grants (Victoria) Limited (CCG) is pleased to make comment to the Senate Committee in relation to the Primary Schools for the 21st Century (P21) element of the Building the Education Revolution (BER) on behalf of the CCG.

For over 150 years the Catholic Community has been a significant provider of education in Australia. The vast majority of school capital facilities have been provided by the Catholic Community. Government support for capital facilities has only been a reality since the 1960's from the Australian Government and much more recently from the Victorian government. Whilst this support has been most welcome it is only a small component of the current annual capital expenditure for Catholic Schools in Victoria.

In recent years Catholic primary schools in Victoria have found it difficult to keep pace with necessary improvements in infrastructure because without adequate government assistance it has been impossible for the Catholic Community to provide for these from its own local resources.

Therefore the P21 program and the significant funding available through it are of considerable assistance in enabling Victorian Catholic Schools to further meet the expectations of education in the 21st Century. The assistance will ensure that the quality of education in Catholic schools continues to improve. The impact of the improved resources in terms of qualitative improvement will be seen over the next few years but the immediate impact in terms of improved morale is already most evident. The response of administrators, principals, teachers, parents, students and the wider community to the P21 program has been extremely positive.

We note that the objectives of the BER program were to:

- provide economic stimulus through the rapid construction and refurbishment of school infrastructure, and
- build learning environments to help children, families and communities participate in activities that will support achievement, develop learning potential and bring communities together.

While P21 has assisted primary schools to develop specific projects and infrastructure to meet educational goals within the program guidelines, the program objectives are different to those of the ongoing capital funding programs. As distinct from the P21 program, ongoing capital funding is focussed on educational priorities within Catholic schools and provision of new schools. Under ongoing capital funding programs projects are carefully tailored to the identified educational needs of local school communities. The need for ongoing capital funding particularly in new schools and secondary schools will remain after the conclusion of the P21 program and the BER.

Background

Catholic Primary Schools in Victoria provide quality education to a significant number of primary age school children. In 2009 there are 398 Catholic Schools enrolling primary age school children:

379 Primary only schools
13 Primary / Secondary schools
6 Special schools

These schools have enrolled in excess of 100,000 primary age children which represents approximately 22% of all primary age school children in Victoria. Catholic Primary Schools are widely dispersed across Victoria and range from small schools in isolated towns to numbers of schools in rural cities and to

provisions in most suburbs of Melbourne. The goal of the Catholic education in Victoria is that every Catholic child who seeks a Catholic Primary School education is able to achieve this.

Each Catholic school in Victoria with primary age children will benefit from the P21 program. Small schools are in receipt of P21 grants of \$250,000 and the largest schools received \$3 million. The total approved P21 program funding for Catholic schools in Victoria is \$749.5 million.

Particular aspects of the P21 program highlighted by the Senate Committee

(i) In terms of conditions and criteria the Guidelines provided for the program were clear in terms of:

- the priority order for which funding could be used
- the amount of indicative funding possible for each school
- the required timelines for the program
- the requirement for community access
- the requirement to maintain current and planned capital expenditure

Each school community took responsibility for consultation at a local level in respect of the desired project that was to be applied for given the criteria and funding established by the Program Guidelines. The system appreciated the flexibility within the guidelines that allowed for the non-use of design templates where timelines could still be met. Design templates were not used by Victorian Catholic schools.

In the very few cases where there were local issues, these were resolved following communication between the CCG and the local school authority. The CCG appreciates the need for conditions and criteria and from its perspective they were satisfactory.

- (ii) The implementation plan for our system was largely based on the direct engagement of individual architects by individual schools with projects delivered through a competitive tender process. This resulted in appropriate local contractors being given opportunities to tender for projects. The CCG is very pleased with the significant use of local contractors on P21 projects.
- (iii) The main role of the State Government with respect to the P21 program has been to provide for streamlined planning provisions to ensure rapid construction start is possible and to also minimize red tape. Accordingly new provisions were introduced into the Victorian Planning Provisions in May which exempted the need for a planning permit to be obtained for certain development works funded under the BER program. However planning approval was still required. New provisions allowed for an amount of 'self certification' of projects but in the main, projects are considered directly by the Department of Planning and Community Development.

The work of the Victorian Co-ordinator General for Nation Building and Jobs Plan is acknowledged as being most helpful together with staff of the Department Planning and Community Development of the Victorian State Government.

- (iv) It is noted that the BER program is primarily an economic stimulus package in response to the global economic crisis. As a result, timelines to ensure construction commenced quickly were extremely short particularly given the usual planning and design time required for construction projects.

At the time of preparation of this submission, the CCG understands that most P21 projects in Catholic schools will meet timelines. The meeting of these timelines has been made possible as a result of the hard work and dedication of our school principals, staff, teachers, parents and their architects. They have worked energetically to meet the timelines imposed by the program.

In respect of budget issues, there was some early confusion regarding the ability for all schools to attract the full indicative funding amount, however, these issues were resolved quickly by DEEWR.

Given the speed at which the sector is progressing towards meeting the program timelines, the cash flow available to the system needs to be carefully monitored. This issue is being carefully monitored by the BGA and DEEWR and significant recent improvements have been achieved. We will continue to work closely with DEEWR to ensure that cash flows match project needs.

Payments to this date have been timely and have been expedited following provision of the information required by DEEWR.

It is worth noting that, while Catholic schools in Victoria welcome the additional infrastructure, the P21 program has not alleviated the ongoing need for capital funding from the government which addresses the need for new school infrastructure and educational priorities such as teaching and learning environments. Given the economic stimulus and job creation focus of the BER, it should in no way affect future allocations of capital funding by the Commonwealth Government for Catholic schools.

- (v) The CCG has little or no issue in terms of school signs and plaques. These are being provided directly by DEEWR to schools. It is not unreasonable for taxpayers to be aware that the facilities being built per the P21 program are as a result of an initiative of the Australian Government.

In relation to the recognition ceremonies to be held as part of the P21 program, the CCG has no issue other than to indicate that choosing dates, given the number of project across the country, that are convenient for all will not be simple to arrange.

- (vi) The P21 program for Catholic schools in Victoria has been managed on behalf of Catholic Capital Grants (Victoria) Ltd by staff from all Victorian Catholic Education Offices. Additional staff were required to administer and manage the program and the system gratefully acknowledges the Administration Allowance provided by the Australian Government to allow this support and management of the program to be delivered. Those staff who relate regularly with the staff of DEEWR would wish the Senate Committee to know that matters have generally been handled promptly and sensitively.

The face to face meetings called by the DEEWR National Coordinator have been most helpful.

Conclusion

Although the P21 program has placed significant demands on DEEWR, systems and school communities, especially principals, the CCG gratefully welcomes the initiative and recognises the significant investment being made in school infrastructure. The program is providing a stimulus to local economies and the provision of improved capital facilities will allow schools and communities to support achievement, develop learning potential and to come together

Future government capital funding should not be affected in any way by the BER. The objectives and purpose of the BER is different from ongoing capital funding programs. Victorian Catholic schools, primary, secondary and new schools, will continue to need ongoing capital funding to service new areas, meet increased demand and expectations and address educational priorities.

Contact details

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