

Submission
No 82

INQUIRY INTO THE BUILDING THE EDUCATION REVOLUTION PROGRAM

Organisation: Matong Public School

Name: Mr Ian Lucas

Date received: 5/06/2010

Matong Public School

Matong Street, Matong N.S.W. 2652

To Whom It May Concern,

As principal of Matong Public School I wish to put forward the following submission for its consideration at the upcoming N.S.W. Parliamentary Inquiry Into The Building The Education Revolution (BER) Program.

I have found the whole BER process to be a frustration from start to finish and my school community is disappointed with what we have received for the amount of money allegedly allocated to our school. A good deal of time has been spent in negotiations with relevant personnel in an effort to achieve what we believed to be the best outcome for school. Unfortunately, the end result has fallen well short of our original proposal.

I have divided my submission into three sections – Background, Concerns and Positives – and have endeavoured to be as succinct as possible as I outline the causes of my frustration.

Background

- Initially, we were asked to identify works that we would like to have considered for completion under the BER program. After a good deal of school and wider community consultation, we arrived at a list of seven projects which were duly forwarded to the appropriate authority.
- In the first round of the P21 BER grants, we received indicative funding of \$200 000 for a COLA and \$50 000 for classroom upgrades.
- Shortly after this notification, a team of eight consultants arrived at our school and spent up to three hours to organising our "projects". I explained that we had, in fact, proposed seven projects and between us we tried to fit what we could of these projects into the two funding grants. The COLA proposal was to cover the basketball court (approximately 11m x 26m) and have covered walkways linking the classrooms to the library, COLA and toilets. The project manager kept telling me that I was being ambitious as I only had \$200 000 but they would put forward a proposal including as much as possible of what I was asking.
- Our major project priority was extra storage areas – something which we desperately lack - and we had a well-thought out plan to maximise “wasted” areas between appropriate, existing structures. However, due to the fact that the areas we had earmarked for storage were not part of the building nominated by the BER team for refurbishment, we were advised by the project manager that our proposal was not an option. Our P. and C. has since spent a sizeable amount of their own funds in an effort to overcome our storage problems.
- When plans for the proposed works arrived, they allowed for approximately 50m of covered walkway and a COLA that covered about one-third of the basketball court (12m x 9m). I discussed at length the pros and cons of the proposed works with Laing O’Rourke’s project manager and we agreed that a COLA of those dimensions was hardly worth erecting. She suggested that as the paving to be covered by the proposed walkway didn't meet DET specifications and was in poor condition, we might look at doing away with the COLA and use those funds to replace the pathway. I mentioned my concerns that the funding was actually for a COLA and that to eliminate it completely might not be allowed. I also expressed my concern that what we were getting for our \$200 000 didn't appear to be much. She advised me that out of that money had to come GST, fees etc., as well as the structures. After further consultation

with community representatives, we decided that as the priority was for a COLA over the court, if anything had to go, or be reduced, it should be the covered walkways.

- And so we were advised that the money we had been allocated would give us a COLA approximately 14 m X 12 m which covers slightly less than half the area we had originally anticipated.

Concerns

- Our major concern is the apparent lack of value for money and “overkill” of specifications for the COLA. Under Investing In Our Schools (whilst principal at Lord Howe Island Central School), I was able to source and project manage a COLA that covered our whole basketball court and complied with stringent with DET Asset Management Unit specifications and standards as it had to withstand salt air and cyclonic wind conditions. The total cost of this project was \$92 000. This was only two years prior to the commencement of our works here and had the added costs of shipping all materials (including gravel, sand and cement for footings) from the mainland; flying tradesmen in from the mainland; and, accommodating the tradesmen for the time it took them to erect the structure. In Matong, we gained a COLA half this size for more than twice the money!
- Footings 2m x 2m x 1.5m for each of the six posts, to a layman like me, were amazing, as were the 250 mm x 150 mm posts to support the structure. The engineering firm contracted to erect the structure were surprised at the specifications upon which they were instructed to tender.
- The estimated costings (we are yet to be provided with the actual costings, even though the work was completed last December) are “interesting” to say the least and are a source of mirth and chagrin for the school community. It is almost incomprehensible that the structure we have finished up with could cost anywhere near what is alleged.
- Our other major concern is the inordinate amount of administrivia associated with the structure – eight consultants beforehand; project management personnel; the number of inspections during construction and after completion; the mandatory signage (which is bigger than our school sign); the mandatory recognition ceremony that was unable to attract any government representative but was expected to be attended by local community members who were aghast at the cost of the project.

Positives

- It would be most unfair if I was not to acknowledge the benefits of the BER to our school. We have finished up with a structure that we could not have afforded any other way and for that, we, as a school community, are grateful.
- All personnel associated with the project have been very helpful, courteous and obliging.
- Tradesmen working on the project have been relatively local.

I thank you for the opportunity to share my opinions with your inquiry. I have endeavoured to be objective in my summation of our experience and trust that the findings of your inquiry are used in a constructive way to ensue better value for money should future opportunities of this type arise.

Yours sincerely,
Ian Lucas
Principal

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To Whom It May Concern,

Whilst we are very grateful for the money received from the Federal Government to refurbish our school buildings and erect our Covered Outdoor Learning Area (COLA), it would be remiss of us not to write to your inquiry and express our extreme disappointment at what we believe to be the poor use of resources and the lack of value for dollar for the projects carried out at our school, especially the COLA.

After substantial consultation with the school community, we submitted a list of seven projects in order of importance but, when the funding was announced, we were told that only two could be done – classroom refurbishment (which was low on our list of priorities) and the erection of a COLA (which was listed last).

Despite a good deal of discussion and negotiation between the school, project manager (Laing-O'Rourke) and other relevant authorities, aimed at maximising value for dollar, we have finished up with a structure that is approximately 14m by 12m. As grand as the COLA is, it covers less than half the basketball court that our original submission had requested and, unfortunately, at this time of year, does not provide shade over the intended area. This was evident at our recent school ANZAC service when, at 10.30 a.m. on a very warm day, most visitors had to sit under shade provided by other buildings because the concrete basketball court was in full sun.

We are still awaiting a final breakdown of costs for this project but we are very strong in our opinion that, despite the extravagance of the specifications for the COLA, there is no way that a total figure of \$200 000 can be claimed or justified. When one considers that the "rule of thumb" for costing a new house in our area is around \$1 000 per square metre – which includes paint, floor coverings, fittings etc – the COLAs price tag of almost \$1 200 per square metre for a roof and six posts is ludicrous.

As a community, we are disappointed with what we have received for the \$200 000 provided for our COLA and as a committee we felt these views had to be brought to your attention.

On a more positive note, there is no questioning the quality of the materials used in the structure and the tradespeople used during the classroom refurbishment and construction of the COLA were relatively local.

Yours faithfully,

Jennifer Hatty
Secretary
Matong P & C Association