

Submission
No 112

INQUIRY INTO THE BUILDING THE EDUCATION REVOLUTION PROGRAM

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Submission

Inquiry into the Building the Education Revolution program

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This submission has been prepared by the Association of Independent Schools of NSW (AISNSW) following consultation with a wide range of independent schools and other stakeholders

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The AIS will be pleased to elaborate on any aspects of this submission at the Committee's invitation and discretion.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Newcombe', with a long horizontal stroke above it.

Dr Geoff Newcombe
Executive Director

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INTRODUCTION

The Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales (AISNSW) is the peak body representing the independent schools sector in the state. The Association represents more than 430 schools enrolling approximately 173 000 students, which accounts for some 15 per cent of NSW school enrolments.

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. Independent schools include:

- Schools affiliated with Christian denominations, such as Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Seventh Day Adventist and Uniting Church schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as Grammar schools
- Community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities

Independent schools are not-for-profit institutions founded by religious or other groups in the community and are registered with the registering authority, the NSW Board of Studies. Most independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis.

AISNSW provides a wide range of services to independent schools throughout NSW to support their provision of education. This provision is supported by wide consultation with stakeholders.

This submission draws on the views of independent schools, educational administrators and professional staff with expertise and experience in the development of school facilities and the provision of education to a wide range of students and schools.

BACKGROUND

Funding available to independent schools in NSW under the BER program is administered by the Association of Independent School's Block Grant Authority (AISBGA) under the terms of the agreement between the AISBGA and the Australian Government, represented by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). Schools agree to participate in the program under the terms of the agreement between each individual school and the AISBGA. The agreement reflects the requirements prescribed in the agreement between the AISBGA and the Australian Government and the BER Guidelines provided through DEEWR.

The following table shows the funding allocated to independent schools in NSW for each of the three elements of the BER program, the number of independent schools participating and the number of projects being undertaken in each element:

	Funding	Number of Schools	Number of Projects
Element 1 Primary Schools for the 21 st Century (P21)	\$476 968 536	293	327
Element 2 National School Pride (NSP)	\$43 205 989	314	319
Element 3 Science and Language Centres for 21 st Century Secondary Schools (SLC)	\$13 228 095	12	12
TOTAL	\$533 402 620	N/A *	658

* Some schools are participating in more than 1 element of the program

AISNSW developed a number of initiatives to support the implementation of the BER program in independent schools. Details of each of the initiatives are outlined below:

Communication

School Briefings

A series of briefings were held across NSW to introduce schools to the BER Program and outline the Australian Government's requirements and AISNSW BGA processes.

AISNSW BGA BER Updates

BER Updates have been used as the primary means of communicating information about the BER program within the sector. The updates are provided to all schools and have included information about funding processes, DEEWR requirements, planning approvals, amendments to processes and new initiatives.

Website

The AISNSW website and the AISNSW BGA page within that website have been modified to enable the storage of BER support documents for school access, including BER Guidelines, Planning Approval Advice, Project delivery information, NSW Nation Building and Jobs Plan Taskforce documents and AISNSW BGA BER Updates. The website also facilitated the online application process for all elements of the BER Program and a portal to facilitate DEEWR's monthly reporting process.

Architectural and Planning Advisory Group

A panel of architects and planners with experience in school building projects was convened to provide advice and support to AISNSW and AISNSW BGA officers. The advisory group assisted the officers to identify issues that could emerge for schools and the sector as they responded to the opportunities offered by the BER Program. Advice provided was then passed on to schools through briefings and updates.

Development of Funding Agreements

AISNSW BGA officers worked with Minter Ellison Lawyers to develop the BGA (BER) Participant Agreement to ensure consistency with the BER Guidelines and the agreement between AISNSW BGA and the Australian Government.

Planning Support Documents

Documents explaining relevant planning legislation and project delivery models were developed in consultation with Minter Ellison Lawyers and made available to all independent schools through briefing sessions and the AISNSW BGA website.

Legal, Architectural and Planning Advisory Service

Preliminary legal, architectural and town planning advice was made available to schools to assist with the development of projects to be funded under the BER program. The timely advice provided through this service enabled schools to progress their projects within the parameters of the BER schedule.

Financial Health Assessment and Financial Viability Advice

A school finance consultant was engaged to provide advice to schools in regard to DEEWR's Financial Health Assessment Framework and to support the schools' ability to comply with the Australian Government requirements in relation to financial viability and maintenance of capital expenditure. This advice was provided through workshops conducted across the state and via written documents.

Funding Application Assessment Committee

Applications for each round of funding within each element of the BER Program were reviewed by the Funding Assessment Committee to ensure compliance with the BER Guidelines and efficient use of the funds available. Committee members included members of the Architectural and Planning advisory group and AISNSW and AISNSW BGA officers. The committee responsible for assessing applications for funding under the Science and Language Centres for 21st Century Secondary Schools element of the BER Program included representatives of the government and catholic education sectors in NSW.

Issues raised by the Assessment Committees were followed up with individual schools prior to applications being forwarded to DEEWR. Areas of follow-up included estimates of cost (value for money), size of facilities (benefit to the school community) and clarification of enrolment data, particularly if changes from 2008 census data to February 2009 data impacted significantly on funding.

Project Liaison Officers

Project Liaison Officers are part of the case management protocol developed to assist AISNSW BGA to meet its reporting and accountability requirements and support the smooth delivery of BER projects across the sector. A Project Liaison Officer has been allocated to every independent school in NSW participating in the BER Program. The Project Liaison Officers will visit the schools at particular points throughout the delivery of the BER projects to discuss project progress, report any emerging difficulties or delays and complete a report of each visit to be retained by the BGA as part of the project file.

NSW Nation Building and Jobs Plan Taskforce Coordination Committee

AISNSW BGA Officers meet fortnightly with representatives of the Catholic Education Commission, the NSW Department of Education and Training Integrated Projects Office, and the NSW Nation Building and Jobs Plan Taskforce as a means of enhancing communication between the groups and facilitating a coordinated approach to activities where appropriate to ensure efficient and effective delivery of the BER Program across the sectors.

BER Project Update

This document provides a report of project delivery in the sector and provides an opportunity to promote the range of facilities developed in independent schools in NSW under the Commonwealth Government's BER Program. The first edition of this brochure was produced in July 2009 and has been provided to every independent school in NSW, members of state and federal parliament, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, NSW Catholic Education Commission, NSW Department of Education and Training, NSW Nation Building and Jobs Plan Taskforce and the Independent Schools Council of Australia.

Staffing

Additional staff have been allocated to the AISNSW BGA team to assist with a range of activities associated with the implementation of the BER Program within the sector.

TERM OF REFERENCE 1

The levels and appropriateness of fees and charges imposed by various NSW Government agencies

Independent schools in NSW are responsible for the development and completion of projects under the BER program at an individual school level. This means that planning, design and construction arrangements are negotiated directly between the school and the service provider within the parameters of the school's funding agreement with the AISBGA and the BER Guidelines

Some independent schools have accessed the alternate development approval process available by legislation through the NSW Nation Building and Jobs Plan Taskforce but no fee has been levied by the Taskforce for this service.

TERM OF REFERENCE 2

Whether costs charged for construction of BER projects are in line with industry standards

Applications from independent schools for funding under each of the elements of the BER program were reviewed by the AISNSW BGA Funding Application Assessment Committee prior to be forwarded to DEEWR. Committee members included members of the BER Architectural and Planning Advisory Group and AISNSW and AISNSW BGA officers. Schools were required to include estimated costs of the proposed project in their applications and to have these estimates reviewed by a quantity surveyor prior to the application being submitted.

In cases where the estimated per m² cost appeared to be above industry standards contact was made with the school to discuss factors specific to the school site or project design that could be seen as contributing to a higher than average cost.

While there has been some anecdotal reporting of isolated incidences of cost increases, information available at this stage suggests that most increases in estimated costs have been a result of unforeseen site expenses rather than an increase in costs for construction.

TERM OF REFERENCE 3

The effectiveness of government oversight and review of contracts signed between Head Contractors and the NSW Government

As independent schools in NSW are responsible for the development and completion of their own BER projects, contracts are negotiated directly between the school and building companies, tradespeople and/or service providers.

The NSW Government has no role in the oversight or review of contracts for BER projects in independent schools in NSW.

TERM OF REFERENCE 4

The use of local builders and tradespeople during the construction of BER projects

Projects completed by independent schools under the National School Pride element of the BER program are generally small scale infrastructure and refurbishment projects in keeping with the BER Guidelines. The nature of these projects has determined that they have, in most instances, been completed by local tradespeople selected by each individual school. The only exceptions to this have been in some remote areas where the necessary tradespeople may not have been available in the immediate community resulting in schools engaging tradespeople from the nearest larger regional community.

A survey of schools participating in the Primary Schools for the 21st Century element of the BER program showed that, of those schools who responded, over 83 per cent had engaged a builder from their local area. Over 92 per cent of schools responding the survey indicated that they had engaged other tradespeople from their local area.

Evidence from BER Project Liaison Officers appointed by the AISBGÁ suggests that this trend is also evident in schools participating in the Science and Language Centres for 21st Century Secondary Schools element of the BER program.

TERM OF REFERENCE 5

Whether outcomes were of acceptable quality and suitable to the needs of each individual school

Funding available under the National School Pride element of the BER program was generally used by independent schools in NSW for small scale infrastructure and minor refurbishment projects in accordance with the BER Guidelines. This enabled many schools to complete projects that had been needed for some time to enhance their facilities and improve the learning environment for their students.

Similarly, projects identified by independent schools in NSW for completion under the Primary Schools for the 21st Century element of the BER program, were also within the priority areas outlined in the BER Guidelines. Being able to consider the list of identified priorities ensured that schools identified and developed a project that reflected their particular needs. Review of applications for funding by the Funding Application Assessment Committee ensured that schools adhered to the priority order prescribed in the BER Guidelines and that projects proposed in funding applications would not duplicate existing facilities at the school.

Information collected by BER Project Liaison Officers and through a survey of schools participating in the Primary Schools for the 21st Century element of the BER program indicates an overwhelming level of satisfaction in both the quality of the outcome of the projects and the way in which the project has met the needs of each individual school. Comments collected from schools include:

- The new facility has provided much needed learning spaces for drama, music, dance, productions and sporting activities
- Indoor sports programs and sporting events will now be able to take place in all weather conditions
- We now have an enhanced PDHPE sporting program
- We now have much needed new learning spaces and resources
- The new facility offers many different options for the school including indoor assemblies, performances and physical education, sport and drama classes
- The project has resulted in improvement to study areas and information and research access
- Our school curriculum will be strengthened as a result of the BER program
- The new facility reduces overcrowding
- We now have a new assembly area that will cater for the whole school
- There is an improved feel and appearance to our school
- The new facility provides an excellent venue in which the college can gather as one on a regular basis

- The new facility provides a first rate meeting, sporting and performance facility which will act as an essential teaching and learning resource for K - 12 students
- The new facility enhances the school's curricular and co-curricular offerings
- Our new library will provide students with essential learning resources and easy access
- Educationally, the new addition will greatly enhance the school's current Stage One curriculum and assist the students to cope with its demands
- The new library has lifted the education culture of our school
- The project has been a positive experience and the facility created has moved the school forward in the best possible way

Contracts negotiated between schools and building companies and tradespeople involved in the construction or completion of work under the BER program usually include what is commonly referred to as a "defects" clause enabling schools to ensure any concerns regarding poor quality work are remedied prior to final payment to the builders or tradespeople responsible for the work.

TERM OF REFERENCE 6

Any other related matters

The following additional information regarding Primary Schools for the 21st Century projects in independent schools in NSW is provided to the Inquiry for consideration of the Committee:

School Contributions to P21 Projects

69 per cent of schools surveyed reported that they are making a contribution to the cost of their project

Of these schools:

- 41.7 per cent reported that the school's contribution was up to \$100 000;
- 28.6 per cent reported that the school's contribution was between \$100 001 and \$500 000;
- 16.4 per cent reported that the school's contribution was between \$500 001 and \$1 500 000; and
- 13.2 per cent reported that the school's contribution was greater than \$1 500 000

Apprentices involved in P21 Projects

73 per cent of schools surveyed reported that apprentices have been engaged in the construction of their P21 Projects.

Of these schools:

- 36.5 per cent reported that 1 or 2 apprentices have been involved in their project;
- 26 per cent reported that 3 or 4 apprentices have been involved in their project; and
- 37.5 per cent reported that 5 or more apprentices have been involved in their projects

23 schools were unable to comment on the number of apprentices engaged in their projects at this stage because, although they had sought to engage companies with a commitment to the employment of apprentices, construction of their projects was yet to begin.

Indigenous Trainees or Employees involved in P21 Projects

17.5 per cent of schools surveyed reported that indigenous trainees or employees have been engaged in the construction of their P21 projects.

Of these schools:

- 69 per cent reported that 1 or 2 indigenous trainees or employees have been involved in their project;
- 22 per cent reported that 3 or 4 indigenous trainees or employees have been involved in their project; and
- 9 per cent reported that 5 or more indigenous trainees or employees have been involved in their project

25 schools were unable to comment on the number of indigenous trainees or employees engaged in their projects at this stage because, although they had sought to engage companies with a commitment to the employment of indigenous trainees or employees, construction of their projects was yet to begin.

Contribution of P21 Projects to local communities

Schools that have completed their P21 projects have reported the following benefits for the wider community:

- Our area is a growth area and there are no other facilities of this type in the area
- The facility provides a training facility for allied health professionals
- Our school is surrounded by new housing developments and an early learning centre has been a long held dream of the community. It will also enable us to provide an after school care service for the community
- We are in discussions with our local council regarding use of the facility by the community for a "Life Long Learning" program
- Local community groups including the Girls' Brigade, a Youth Group and a Church Boys' Club have already expressed interest in using the new facility
- Our new facility will enable us to provide a respite service to the parents of children with disabilities
- The facility will provide a much needed larger space for community meetings and public events
- Community groups are using our meeting facility

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The BER program has heralded the largest building program ever seen in the independent schools sector of NSW. In total, across 2010 - 2012, more than \$500 million is being provided by the Australian Government for the refurbishment of existing school buildings and facilities and the construction of high quality and greatly needed classrooms, learning areas, libraries and sporting facilities. Independent schools in NSW are very appreciative of the opportunities the BER program has provided to assist them to continue to provide the best possible educational environment to their students.

The progress to date of BER projects in independent schools in NSW would suggest that the key objectives of the program are being met. The majority of National School Pride projects have been completed and construction has commenced on most Primary Schools for the 21st Century and Science and Language Centres for 21st Century Secondary Schools projects.

The management of independent schools' BER projects at the school level has ensured that management fees have been largely avoided, meaning that government funds have gone directly into the buildings and facilities constructed or enhanced under the BER program. The independent schools sector of NSW is therefore confident that the implementation of the BER program in this sector has achieved value for taxpayers' dollars.

The ability of independent schools in NSW to work closely with local builders, tradespeople and trainees has ensured that the financial benefits of the BER program have been returned to the local community and contributed to the stimulus of local economies as well as the broader national economy.

Evidence collected by BER Project Liaison Officers confirms a significant level of satisfaction both with the quality of work undertaken as part of the BER program in independent schools in NSW and the benefit that the school and the wider community has, or will, derive from completed projects.

Overall, it would be fair to say that, at this stage, the experience of the BER program in independent schools in NSW has been overwhelmingly positive.