

Submission
No 132

INQUIRY INTO THE BUILDING THE EDUCATION REVOLUTION PROGRAM

Organisation: Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South
Wales

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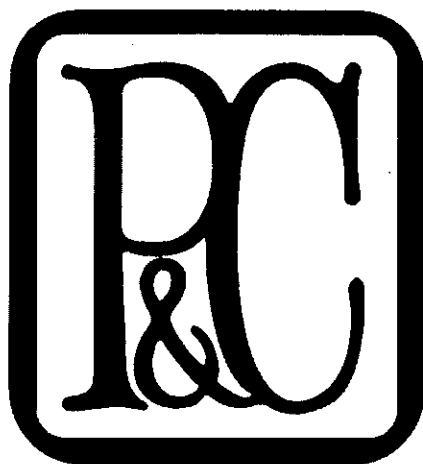
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Submission for the Inquiry into the Building the Education Revolution Program

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PREAMBLE¹

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Association of New South Wales (P&C Federation) is committed to a free public education system which is open to all people, irrespective of culture, gender, academic ability and socio-economic class and empowers students to control their own lives and be contributing members of society.

This commitment is based on the belief that:

- all students have the capacity to learn
- the Government has prime responsibility to provide an education system open to all, which is free and secular
- schools should be structured to meet the needs of individual students and should respect the knowledge those students bring to school and build on that knowledge to foster their understanding about the world.

Parents, as partners in the education process, have a right and a responsibility to play an active role in the education of their children.

P&C Federation and its representatives share a responsibility of ensuring representative decision making for the benefit of all students.

Introduction

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the Building the Education Revolution (BER) program. The P&C Federation believes that *'since school buildings and facilities are a considerable investment of public funds, planned preventative maintenance by the DET is essential to protect this investment. Realistic funding provisions must be made for maintenance, replacement and upgrading of all government schools and this is totally the responsibility of the DET.'*²

Recognising the long term shortfall in government funding for the maintenance and construction of new buildings for public schools we welcomed the BER program. We saw an opportunity to address some of the much needed upgrade of buildings and the provision of new structures to meet the educational needs of today's students. In many of our public schools students, staff and parents work in outdated, worn-out and overcrowded conditions.

¹ Preamble of Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW. 2010 P&C Handbook p 1-2

² Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW. 2010 P&C Handbook PREMISE 3.11B p6-7

² Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW. 2010 P&C Handbook PREMISE 3.11B p6-7

Our public school facilities reflect an ongoing lack of commitment by successive governments to the provision of facilities that value and affirm the life of children and young people. The rights of children to work within an environment that reflects OHS standards that apply to all others must be embraced by governments. Public education is the responsibility of governments which have a legal responsibility to make sure that the facilities provided are safe clean and fit for purpose.

It was in this context that we have welcomed the additional building programs provided through the BER.

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

The frequently heard call has been that the work carried out has not returned benefit for the cost. Concerns have arisen as school P&Cs have compared the work carried out in other places and with work done at other times. The costs have appeared inflated.

Under the previous 'school pride' building program, we have evidence of the scope of work that had been quoted by a particular contractor for the school that under the BER school pride program came in at more than 100% more using the same contractor. The source of the inflated costs was not illuminated to us. The scope of work was identical.

There is a strong sense that the management fees have been excessive

Similarly there is concern that contractors have been able to inflate the costs and fees that they have charged.

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

The P&C Federation acknowledges that the time constraints placed on the program created problems in terms of communication and in terms of potential value for money. The consequence was the marginalisation of school communities in the decision making process about the items to be included under the National School Pride. The low level of engagement of school communities in decision making about the priorities for their school does not support the essential inclusiveness desired in public education and public policy making.

There have been many stories published in the media and concerns from parents about the costs of the building projects = especially in comparison with similar projects currently running at non- government schools. Media reports have made it abundantly clear that those schools, that have self-managed or been managed by an independent organization, such as the various Catholic Dioceses, have received far greater value for money than our schools. Halls of twice the size have been built for less money than at NSW State Government schools. We recognize and appreciate the responsibility of the DET in ensuring safe and legally binding work practices but we are puzzled by what appears to be excessively high costs in comparison with non DET works and by works performed outside the BER.

A few parents have commented that it seems like construction companies have based their quotes on the funds allocated to each school - information which is available on the BER website - instead of quoting based on the individual projects.

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

The P&C Federation has been pleased to see that school principals were not responsible for the management of these projects. We affirm that the work of school principals is about the educational programs in their school. DET management is to be applauded for maintaining this stance.

Some P&Cs have reported that the scope of works has sometimes varied as the project has proceeded. They also report that principals are sometimes unable to provide clear communication to them. This issue seems to reflect the lack of communication and clarity to school principals about why works are varied. Descoping of works has been a disappointing outcome for some school communities,

It appears that some managing contractors and principal liaison officers have been far more effective than others in providing responsive action and explanation to inquiries.

School principals have not always providing community access to information and building scope of works - thus providing additional frustration for school communities.

4. The use of local builders and tradespeople during the constructions of BER projects

There is a perception that local builders and other tradespeople have not had access to participation in the tendering process. Concerns have been raised that local tradespeople have not been able to gain contracts within the domain of large coordinating companies drawing on existing known sub contractors. In rural communities this appears as a distorting aspect of the tendering process.

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

The National School Pride Projects allowed for the DET to determine the scope of works which allowed for flexibility and input from school principals and sometimes this took place by consultation with school communities through the P&C to choose either condition based assessment works or project works that they considered were a priority for the school.

In relation to the school building projects Primary schools for the 21st C and the science and Language centres for low socio economic communities Federation has acknowledged the cost of ensuring safety of children and indeed workers. However, we have not always been satisfied that the general wellbeing of students during construction has been adequately meet. Over crowding of playgrounds is a price that children have paid.

For the schools where construction has been completed many are delighted with the outcomes especially where schools have had dangerous buildings and blocks removed and renovated. Other schools have received much needs halls, canteens and new toilet blocks to facilitate for the number of students attending their school.

We have encountered some problems with the definition of facilities standards as applied to schools under the BER.

In particular the continued installation of unflued gas heaters when there are strong health department warnings about the use of unflued gas heaters. The cessation of this practice as of 14th May has been noted. We look forward to the replacement of any unflued gas heaters already installed in new buildings.

The installation of ovens in canteens has been an area of contention as school communities see that ovens provide a mechanism for the provision of healthier foods and larger scope of foods that might be prepared in canteens. A significant number of P & C have been frustrated by the claim that ovens cannot be installed. Issues around fire safety seem irrelevant when homes have ovens!

The development of garden and cooking programs into the pedagogy of primary schools and the use of canteen facilities by Before and After school care demonstrates the inappropriateness of the current DET position on the installation of ovens,

Overall, some schools have stated that the 'intentions of the BER program are ostensibly good, but the implementation has not resulted in satisfactory outcomes. The program needs to continue under stricter control so that schools yet to complete projects can benefit from greater assets. Those with completed and unacceptable projects need to be given the opportunity to further realize the benefits and true value this scheme was designed to supply.'

We have encouraged individual schools to respond with their concerns – our affiliates have sent concerns to us which we have forwarded to the BER monitoring team and followed up with the Minister – those particular details are available should you wish them.

The P&C Federation congratulates the government for their efforts to improve the facilities in schools for future generations. However, the P&C acknowledges that there are some schools who have been unable to have their needs met. The P&C Federation encourages the government and the DET to improve their consultation methods with the schools and the representative body of the parents and community the local P and C.