

**Submission
No 3**

**INQUIRY INTO THE BUILDING THE EDUCATION
REVOLUTION PROGRAM**

Name: Hastings Public School – School Council

Date received: 22/04/2010

Partially Confidential

Senate Inquiry into Primary Schools for the Twenty First Century Program

Hastings Public School, located in Port Macquarie, New South Wales has an enrolment of 470 students and was allocated \$3 million under the Federal Government Building the Education Revolution Scheme. The details of our involvement in this program follow.

In April last year the school principal, Grant Heaton was contacted by Cliff Hoey, a principal seconded to liaise with schools on behalf of the BER. Cliff had examined the 13 proposals the school community had made and explained that two of these projects would be funded by the \$3 million allocated under the BER guidelines. These projects were :

- 1) Two permanent classrooms to replace two demountable classrooms that had been on site since 1985
- 2) A cover (COLA) over our netball court which also serves as the departure area for our bus travellers. It was felt the cover would provide sun and rain protection for these children.
(Attachment Hastings P S)

Following is our initial list of projects we submitted for consideration.

A permanent double classroom to replace the demountables
Re-surfacing of the basketball court (\$20,000)
Erection of a COLA over the netball court
Grading of Area 3 (\$250,000)
Refurbishment of toilets (\$100,000)
Relocation of cricket nets to Area 3 (\$10,000)
Installation of new roof (\$250,000)
Installation of wireless IT Network (\$50,000)
Paving of the bottom car park (\$50,000)
Refurbishment of canteen (\$100,000)
Replacement of sewer system (\$400,000)
Power system upgrade (\$20,000)
Improved drainage around the existing COLA (\$50,000)

The estimates in brackets are cost figures which were gathered from discussions with representatives from the local Assets Management Unit and with contractors associated with the school. While they are rough figures, the total of \$1.3 million led us to believe that sufficient funds should have been available to cover the costs of the two approved projects and most of the above.

When the initial costing was issued by the BER in June 2009 the principal was surprised with the inflated cost and expressed his concerns to Cliff Hoey. Cliff's response is attached (see attachment Cliff Hoey) The principal also was contacted by The Australian newspaper. (see attachment entitled Australian COLA article).

In September 2009, it became obvious that the school numbers were growing and the principal requested a change in our BER project to extend the two classrooms to four to cater for the additional numbers.

He was informed that Department of Education demographers had advised Hastings was not forecast to grow so the request was denied. This request was repeated (see attachment Request denied) but received the same response and when asked for the name of the demographer or demographers supplying the outdated information, the principal was told to move on.

At the commencement of 2010, revised funding figures were issued for the Hastings BER projects with the COLA now estimated to be costing \$954,000 and the building reduced to approximately \$1.8

million. The prediction of the rising student numbers proved true and so a third request was made to have the COLA deleted from our BER plans and replaced with a four-classroom building. This was again denied (See attachment Request denied 2).

The first meeting of the Hastings School Council for 2010 in February moved to appeal this decision and sent a letter of appeal via email to Angus Dawson, Director of the BER in NSW. This letter was sent to the IPO manager for our area, Rebecca Wark, Julia Gillard, and our two elected representatives, Robert Oakeshott and Peter Besseling. (See attachment BER appeal) We had two major concerns.

- 1) Students would still be taught in demountable classrooms even after \$3 million had been spent
- 2) The cost of the COLA has blown from \$400,000 to approximately \$954,000 with no explanation given for this huge increase.

In mid-March 2010, the principal responded to a fax from Gary Zadkovich, vice president of the NSW Teachers' Federation requesting principals inform him of any BER concerns. The following day Mr Zadkovich appeared on Radio 2GB with Ray Hadley, giving details of our school's BER situation, but not mentioning the school by name. The day after this Angus Dawson appeared on Hadley's program in an attempt to explain the reasons behind the costings of the COLA but with little success. At the same time this was accompanied by almost daily coverage of our problems in The Australian newspaper and an apology from the NSW Minister for Education, Verity Firth who had accused one of our School Council members, Kylie Sherwood, of issuing wrong figures regarding our original COLA built in 2003.

The following week, a hurried meeting was arranged by the Port Macquarie School Education Director, Mark Youngblutt and Rebecca Wark with Kylie Sherwood and Grant Heaton. At this meeting Mrs Sherwood and Mr Heaton were asked if their BER priorities had changed and they again repeated the collective desire to have four classrooms built instead of the COLA. This request was agreed to quickly and the following day the minister announced the planned COLA was not value for money and that Hastings would be receiving four classrooms to house its growing student numbers.

Our concerns about the whole program are:

- 1) If principals or incorporated bodies such as P & Cs had been encouraged to self-manage projects, schools would have received much greater value for money. There have been many examples given over the past weeks of private schools achieving much more than similar sized public schools who are working under a managing contractor. A local school, the St Columba Anglican School, has, according its principal, achieved "spectacular value for money". The facilities this school has or will receive are "two international standard basketball courts, some office areas, a smack kitchenette, mezzanine viewing area, a weights room in the future and possibly one classroom."

There are only three public schools in NSW who have self- managed. Black Hill Public School near Maitland is a case in point and is has been reported this school has achieved much more for its \$900,000 than a similar sized public school in that district.

Since the decision to abandon the Hastings COLA project, the school has contacted the NSW Education Minister and requested that management of the school's project be transferred to the Hastings P & C as it is felt if the managing contractor was not able to deliver value for money with the COLA, why should other projects be any different. Only yesterday, did an

answer arrive from the minister stating that management could only be given to an employee of the department.

- 2) A lack of responsiveness from BER representatives when changes were requested and obviously warranted. It was only when intense media scrutiny was applied to our school's specific situation that all previous objections cited by authorities suddenly did not apply.
- 3) The apparent inflated costs for work that local builders state should be for much less ie the proposed COLA at \$954,000 when in 2003 the school had built a slightly smaller shelter for \$78,000. The school council still feels that the proposed four classroom block which will also include toilets (and a special purposes room "if the budget allows") could be done much more economically than the anticipated \$3 million.
- 4) The Commonwealth Government limited projects to one or two but this has been obviously overlooked by private schools.
- 5)

- 6) The fabrications employed by some politicians when trying to ameliorate a damaging political story. This was evidenced when Senator Mark Arbib was reported in March of this year as saying he was aware of the problem at our school and had visited last year to discuss the issues. Senator Arbib did visit Hastings in August 2009 but only because our principal had gone public in June of that year. This meeting with Senator Arbib was not one where our eventually substantiated fears were shared and discussed. The purpose of the meeting was to make the school see that what was being offered was fair and reasonable. It was also at this meeting that the representative of Reed Constructions informed the school that his company saw the BER program as an opportunity to do something for the community. The almost daily coverage in The Australian newspaper over late March and early April of this year would appear to be at odds with this statement.
- 7) The fact that local tradespeople appear to have been excluded from the process. When the school built its COLA in 2003, a Coffs Harbour company was hired to provide the structure (Williams River Steel), a local concreter to install the base, and local plumbers and tree removalists to perform preliminary site preparation. If we had control of the projects in 2010, this practice would again be followed as far as possible thus realizing one of the key objectives of the government's program.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our school's story of what should have been an outstanding initiative but which has failed to meet expectations in too many areas. \$3 million wisely spent would have provided our school with many educational benefits and the local community with the resulting economic benefits.

Hastings Public School
School Council

[attachments have not been published by the Committee]