

# VICTORIAN PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S BUILDING THE EDUCATION REVOLUTION (BER) PROGRAM IN VICTORIA

An AEU submission paper

AEU Victorian Branch

Submission paper

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## **Summary of AEU Position**

The Australian Education Union (Vic) strongly supports the Federal Government's Building the Education Revolution (BER) program in Victoria. It represents an unprecedented commitment of Federal Government funds to the modernisation and upgrade of Victorian government school buildings and facilities. The program provides government schools with an additional \$2.6 billion over the period 2009-11. This means that students in the public system will have a greater opportunity to encounter modern learning environments as a normal part of their educational experience. The AEU congratulates the Federal Government for making education, through school infrastructure improvements, the centre piece of its GFC economic stimulus package.

The AEU is not an uncritical supporter of the BER. We believe that the Government made a major error in not making the program needs-based with a wider choice of projects. This submission is underpinned by feedback from our members – both teachers and principals – about the impact and administration of the BER at their own schools. While some school communities speak glowingly of their BER experience, others report a less than satisfactory implementation experience. In these cases, issues such as difficult (and unreliable) timelines, bureaucratic heavy-handedness and inflexibility, unresponsive project management, lack of school input, questions about the fairness of funding allocations and the dual nature of the BER program (part employment stimulus and part school infrastructure improvement) have all played their part. Every effort should be made to address the causes of poor implementation performance where they can be identified and remediation should be offered to affected schools where this is at all feasible.

Our evidence suggests that, even taking into account its shortcomings, the large majority of government schools see the BER program in a positive light and believe it will leave a legacy of improved school infrastructure and facilities across the system. Already the investment is seen as transformational in some schools, providing them with a greater capacity to meet community expectations with enhanced educational opportunities for students.

## **Building and Maintenance Needs of Government Schools**

The AEU has collected much evidence over many years of the need for a substantial and ongoing investment in Victoria's public school infrastructure. Our annual State of Our Schools (SOS) survey, completed by principals in over one third of government schools every year, has documented how urgent building and maintenance needs are.

*“Built to 1950s standards, this LTC building is inadequate because the electrical supply cannot run computers and air conditioners. Classrooms are small, the roof leaks and the foundations are rotten. Toilets are old, smelly and poorly ventilated.”*  
(primary school principal)

The day-to-day classroom reality for large numbers of students and teachers has been learning environments which are sub-standard and unable to meet the new demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. The contrast is between on one hand a new and ever-changing curriculum, a more diverse student population (eg students with a range of special needs in mainstream classes), and expanding and complex technologies and on the other poorly maintained buildings from a different era. A great deal of school building stock was constructed to meet the rapid expansion of the school population in the late 1960s and 1970s. It was constructed cheaply and was intended to last no longer than 20 years. We can see this prediction come true in the state of many of our school buildings. Poorly designed on the Dutch gable or 'chicken coop' standard model, these light timber construction buildings are poorly insulated, hot in summer and cold in winter, transmit noise readily, are functionally inflexible and wastefully expensive to maintain.

The effect of working and learning in sub-standard buildings should not be underestimated. The evidence from Australia and overseas links the replacement of building stock past its use-by date with new state-of-the-art buildings, and the provision of new teaching and learning resources, to a positive effect on attendance, on care of the building and on the quality of education which occurs there. Principals also point out the negative effect of sub-standard buildings on community perceptions of a school.

*I'm sick and tired of the rhetoric that "it's what happens in classrooms that makes the difference" – it does – but first impressions are often the deciding factor for enrolments. If no enrolments it doesn't matter how great the programs are. (secondary school principal)*

In 2006 the State Government accepted the cogency of evidence about the run-down nature of public school infrastructure and made a concrete commitment to address the problem. It launched the Victorian Schools Plan (VSP) which committed the Victorian Government to rebuild or modernise every government school by 2016. The Government budgeted \$1.9 billion for capital works spending in the period 2006-2010 for this purpose. The AEU welcomes the progress made so far with the implementation of the VSP as its impact becomes visible across the state.

However, with the additional investment through the BER, we are now urging the State Government to bring forward the completion of the rebuilding/modernisation process by three years to 2013. Similarly, because of the BER's strong investment in primary school infrastructure and the range of challenges now facing government secondary schools, we believe that over the next three years the VSP should have a particular (but not exclusive) focus on secondary schools and major regeneration projects. Additional funds must be committed to building maintenance so that the run-down which has occurred in the past is not repeated. We also propose that, once the BER stimulus funding has ended, the Federal Government set up a new program to provide needs-based funding for ongoing public school infrastructure improvement.

## Positive views about the BER

The AEU's strong support for the BER program is based on the simple fact that a Federal Government program is finally putting substantial infrastructure resources into Victorian public schools after a massive under-investment over many decades. Public school teachers, parents and students spent the latter part of the 1990s and the 00s watching in disbelief (and anger) as new state of the art buildings proliferated in the grounds of well-endowed and increasingly federally-funded private schools while their own schools needed basic repairs to toilet blocks and outmoded classrooms. The introduction of the State Government's Victorian Schools Plan (VSP) in 2006 was a first positive step at a state level to give public schools a sense that something was finally being done to improve their dire situation. The BER is a second step, this time at a federal level, in the same direction.

For teachers and principals who have worked in the Victorian public school system over the past few decades, the very notion that a Federal Government is willing to spend \$16.2 billion on school improvement over a two year period is quite amazing. It does not matter that the main objective of the spending was to stimulate employment and the economy, the fact that the medium for this investment, equivalent to more than 1% of GDP, is schools rather than something else, sends all sorts of positive messages to those involved in school education. The BER simply represents the biggest school capital infrastructure program in Australia's history.

The implementation of the BER has been accompanied by much negative media comment and, in the case of *The Australian*, a daily campaign to find fault with it. This has been concentrated on implementation in public schools. The impression from such coverage is that the program is a 'disaster' and not supported by teachers and principals in government schools. The union has received feedback from many of our members about BER implementation with a large majority supportive of the program, even where there have been irritations with various aspects of it. There is also an awareness of the context within which negative media comment is being made – the predictable politicisation of government policy in an election year (particularly in a double election state like Victoria).

The media impression that the only good stories about BER implementation come from the non-government school sector is a false one. One secondary school which received BER funding through the National School Pride component commented:

*Secondary College received \$200,000 funding from the National School Pride component of the BER. We were able to realise a project that had been in the planning stages for a while, but was likely to fall over due to lack of school raised funds. We were also able to use architects with whom we already had a good working relationship. This enabled us to get very good value for money in the project, an aesthetic result sympathetic to the existing building and a design that totally reflected our needs.* (secondary school principal)

A primary school principal described the implementation of the Primary Schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (P21) program at their school as “an outstanding success” and an opportunity to cooperate positively with other government schools:

*The timing for us could not have been better, coming on the end of an 18-month ‘Building Futures’ modernisation project at the school. BER has ensured that what would have been our remaining four relocatable classrooms have been removed and replaced with a fabulous new 4 classroom non-template building which is in keeping with the rest of the new school. It has also provided a quality OSHCare facility that is co-located with our gym and canteen providing excellent potential for sharing of facilities including food service. This facility also now has much greater potential for after hours community use.*

*The program also saw the refurbishment of our community building (once upon a time shelter-shed) which is now quite stunning and will now support everything from small incursions (up to 150 kids), instrumental music/small group spaces, a community space (where early years’ parenting resources will be offered), a Parents’ Association (who originally funded the conversion the shelter shed into a usable building) meeting space and store; and finally, a space for both a music playgroup and general playgroup for the community. All this was achieved for \$500,000 under the allocated amount for our school. We, along with some other schools were permitted to reallocate the remaining \$500,000 to the local SDS which was severely disadvantaged under the per-capita BER funding model. I know that the SDS and their wider community are very grateful.*

A special school principal whose BER project was a non-template design gymnasium/performing arts facility could only contrast their positive experience with the negative media message:

*The gymnasium is a real windfall for the school. We thought we were going to have to refurbish our existing gymnasium which is more like an old barn, when we eventually have the new school built. Now we will have a new, purpose-built facility that will blend in well with our new school when it is built. We have had a great deal of support from our architects and the regional office architectural personnel. The proposed BER project has been approved, been out to tender and is about to commence.*

*We find it puzzling that some schools, according to the media, have ended up with facilities inappropriate to their needs. Our experience has been that we have decided what our school needs, and have had a great deal of support to ensure that that is what we are getting. Other schools have mentioned that they haven’t had enough contact with their project manager during the building stage. We have the BER project manager and a representative from our architectural firm involved, so we believe we will be well supported.*

Another principal in an outer suburban primary school indicated his satisfaction with the process used (eg templates and external project management) as well as the outcome.

*We were in round one and as a result we are now up and running in our new facility. I can not speak highly enough about this new learning facility. It is very well designed to facilitate a broad variety of teaching and learning strategies with creative and generous use of space. The staff who are currently working in this new environment are very excited as is our students and broader school community.*

*In my humble opinion I feel that any other major rollout should use the same approach in paying top dollar for a limited amount of high quality designs and then making very minor modifications to fit them into the existing school facilities. I feel you get more resources in your school and do not have to waste money on contract supervision from architect firms.*

One country primary school not only appreciated their new building but liked the fact that local people worked on its construction:

*Our school is looking forward to moving into our new building. Great to be given a building that will bring us into this century. Some say there was not enough consultation but this is often a slow and arduous process and I think if we did this on such a building it may never eventuate. Great to see local tradesmen and some of our parent community working on the project.*

## **Concerns about the BER**

The AEU's concerns about the BER are framed within a position of overall support for the program. Our concerns are of two kinds: 1) the parameters which were used to set up the BER and 2) its uneven implementation record.

The major structural problem with the BER was the decision by the Federal Government to provide funding across the board regardless of need. The sheer size of the program (\$16.2 billion) meant that it had the potential to address some of the huge inequities in Australian schooling. Instead, public schools with few resources and an urgent need for basic new infrastructure to meet contemporary community expectations of school facilities and buildings received the same amount of funding (or less) than well-endowed private schools with outstanding facilities and very deep pockets.

The *Herald Sun* (20/3/10) listed 54 major Victorian private schools which received BER funding. These included Geelong Grammar (\$3.175 million), Melbourne Grammar (\$3.4 million), Carey Grammar (\$3.2 million), Caulfield Grammar (\$3.2 million), Haileybury College (\$3.2 million), Scotch College (\$3.2 million), Wesley College (\$3.2 million), Methodist Ladies' College (\$3.2 million), and Xavier College (\$3.2 million). These are all schools with their own large tax-deductible building funds which had received significant funding increases from the Federal Government in the past 13 years. Jim McMorrow from the University of Sydney has estimated that over the period 1995-6 to 2007-8 non-government schools received a funding increase in real terms of \$3.4 billion (or 137%) as compared to \$1.4 billion (68%) to government schools. He concluded that the biggest increases in funding went to independent schools with the highest resources.

The buildings and facilities at such private schools make even the most well-endowed government school look very ordinary. Geelong Grammar which received \$3.175 million for new tennis courts, a shade structure, a library and classrooms had, just prior to the BER, erected its own resort-standard \$16 million Centre for Wellbeing which includes medical facilities, indoor courts, a pool, gymnasium, a dance studio, a fitness centre and a student café. Other elite private schools were able to use BER money for such things as music rooms, pool upgrades, water harvesting systems, improving the thermal performance of buildings and sports halls. This contrasted with many government schools which found that their BER allocation was not enough to provide the basic facilities they needed or was not enough to properly finish facilities so that a school was then left with only two options - either putting up with a second-best building or trying to raise the additional funding itself. For some schools only the first option was viable.

The noted educationist, Professor Richard Teese from Melbourne University commenting on the lack of a needs-based approach in the BER program stated:

“I don’t think any educator accepts the logic of giving to wealthy private schools resources or equipment or buildings which are urgently needed in poorer public schools. The wealthy private school is over-resourced and the children in it have more resources than they can ever use, while poorer public schools can’t get access to facilities and services they urgently need”. (*Herald Sun* 20/3/10)

The AEU believes that a needs-based program could have been delivered across the same geographical area and within the same time-frame. If the 54 elite Victorian private schools listed in the *Herald Sun* had not received BER funding an additional \$150 million could have been spent on government schools which need basic infrastructure improvements.

One of the clear differences in the approaches taken to BER implementation between government and non-government schools is the role of school project management. The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) has an overall systemic management role for the BER in government schools while non-government schools manage projects at the local level. The rationale for the DEECD approach makes sense in terms of the time-lines, the size of the program and the systemic imperative of focusing on the collective needs of local communities rather than individual schools. The AEU supports this approach because of its potential to aid the regeneration and transformation of our public school system. New building programs should be tailored to the needs of the community in which they are based and designed to support the fabric, identity and interaction of that community along with the functionality of shared resources and proximate location of services.

The AEU also supports the DEECD allocation of project equalising costs across all projects because costs inevitably vary per school depending on factors such as the nature of the site, the location and the cost of available services. Individual schools with difficult sites in difficult locations should not

be penalised because they have higher costs, particularly when the allocation of funds for the bulk of the BER (P 21) was simply based on a school size formula rather than individual project costs. However, DEECD communication to schools about the basis of notional funding allocations to individual schools and the rationale for cross-subsidisation should have been much better than it was.

The larger question regarding systemic management of the BER concerns the level of local school input into each project. While it is understood that the priority for the BER was to stimulate the economy and employment and this had to be done as quickly as possible, the reality for schools is that their new buildings will be with them for the long term. The likelihood of another federally-funded infrastructure program of this magnitude occurring any time soon is close to zero. This means that school communities which were shut out of any input into the planning, design and construction of their facilities have legitimate grievances about the processes used and the resulting outcomes. There have been too many examples of poor processes where the identified needs of schools were not taken into account, supposedly because of the pressure of time-lines, and the school community has ended up dissatisfied with one or more elements of their new buildings.

*School Council, principal and staff have had little or no input into design, what is going to happen, the timing of works etc. Having had little say in what happens with the money provided has meant that other urgently needed works such as repairs to substantial white ant damage in our 150 year old heritage listed building has not been included, nor has the initial idea of BER funding providing joint use facilities for school and community been realised. The letting of tenders to outside companies has not increased the local economy at all as no local trades people have been employed.*  
(rural primary school principal)

The BER program needed better guidelines about a requirement for the Department and project managers to properly consult school communities, particularly after the first round of projects when there was more time to allow for local input. When this did happen there is no indication that such an approach led to greater delays in construction.

Schools have contrasted the differing processes used in the Victorian Schools Plan and those used in the BER. The former, with reasonable time-lines, has generally given schools a real say in the planning and design of their facilities rather than requiring them to select one of a set number of templates with little leeway to make local modifications. In some cases state-funded and BER projects have been successfully combined to minimise overhead costs, obtain better value for money and create a better overall outcome for the school.

One of the most frustrating BER situations reported by principals is where there is a gap between what was promised and what is being delivered. In the two examples below, rural primary schools initially felt their input was being listened to and they would get close to what they wanted but ended up with buildings which did not suit their needs.

*We are on a hilly and difficult site. One of our reasons for going for the particular template design was to finally have all our building at the one level. We had the builder turn up for an inspection last week to find out that the floor level of this building is 600mm above ground level. The new site plans (which we hadn't seen) actually has the new floor level 1.1 metres above that of the plans we signed off on.*

*We are meeting next week with the project manager. The builder tells me that our original level can be built to, but it would cost more money. The project manager has indicated he doesn't think it's possible due to costs. (rural primary school)*

*The sustainable template that was a well constructed building on a concrete slab has turned into a pre-fabricated building on stumps. The various levels of insulation are absolutely minimal (no insulation to the floor!). (rural primary school)*

Many problems identified by schools indicate variability in the quality of project management. The DEECD's use of a team of project management firms was well-intentioned in terms of minimising the burden on principals. Not every primary school principal has the knowledge, skills or time to oversee large building projects within very tight time-lines while continuing to carry out their existing workload (averaging around 60 hours per week in the latest State of Our Schools survey). Some principals however, because of the expertise developed from past experience with building projects and knowledge of local builders and tradespeople, felt they could have more effectively and efficiently managed their own school's project but were blocked from doing so. This is another situation where the program should have had more flexibility built into it to allow a greater input from schools which wanted a role in project management. External project managers received a mixed report card from principals. In some cases there were very positive reports of the accessibility and responsiveness of project managers, in others principals spoke of a lack of communication, an unwillingness to take on board the school perspective and poor organisation.

*I would have liked a monthly update as when to expect our project to start, rather than just waiting, thinking it may start next week. It seems the project managers are over-committed, and don't have time to keep in touch. (rural primary school principal)*

*We have been through two project managers and are now working spasmodically with a third. We have had three sets of architects and received yet another set of template drawings this week. (regional primary school principal)*

Another fairly common complaint about the quality of project management is the time delays experienced by many schools. Schools had been given an original start time and one year later were still waiting for the builders to appear.

*Starting time for the building has been moving backwards and now looks like it may be the end of November. A far cry from the original start time of Term 2, 2009. We are thinking if we ever get our building that it will be sometime next century. (regional primary school)*

*We have a school of around 100. After deciding to accept a template (and there was pressure to accept a template) we were originally given a timeline that had building starting in August 2009. Earlier this year we were informed by DEECD that our new building would be constructed in April/May 2010. The project manager predicted May/June. The builder now predicts August. However site access is very difficult and I now predict nothing will happen until Jan 2011. (rural primary school)*

*I would like to express our disappointment in the BER process. We were originally due to have it completed early in 2009, and as yet nothing has happened except the removal of an old portable classroom in term 3 last year to make room for the new building. We could have still been using that room as our Music Room. Then we were informed that it would be done in June/ July this year. The Project Manager has been on site recently and said that a Sept/Oct timeline could see the works completed. Fingers crossed! (outer metropolitan primary school)*

One of the BER frustrations for some principals is the gap between the political rhetoric about using local builders and tradespeople to stimulate the local economy and the reality of these groups being by-passed by project managers. While this occurred only in some projects, it is another area where tighter guidelines requiring local input could have improved the level of satisfaction with the program.

*We have made several representations regarding local tendering with a fully qualified (as per department regulations) local builder to do this job. We have an excellent track record with this type of work which has been recognised by the department. However at all turns we have been stonewalled. (regional primary school)*

*We are now 15 months down the track of the 'hurried stimulus' we were told was behind the State and Federal Government deciding to manage the money of public schools. We were also told that whilst the building would be designed and primarily built elsewhere, local trades people would be employed to do all the works once on site. This meant a lot to a small town needing the 'stimulus' to the economy the government claimed to be providing. We still have no building, we have been told that we will only gain a modular facility and that ALL trades required to make it operational, including electricians, plumbers and carpenters will travel from Melbourne for the job. (regional primary school)*

Value for money arguments across the country have tended to concentrate on government schools and the systemic approach taken by education departments. The position argued by political and media critics of the BER program has favoured an individual school management approach. This is an argument driven as much by ideological preferences as the cost effectiveness of such a model - with the self-governing private school seen as the paradigm for all schools, government and non-government. The evidence that government schools in Victoria are getting less value for money by a systemic approach is anecdotal rather than research-based. Individual examples point in both directions. A clearer idea about the relative value for money of each approach should be available once the Federal Government's BER taskforce, headed by Brett Orgill, makes its first report in August.

The AEU has received evidence from schools about what appears to be different interpretations of Federal Government BER guidelines in each sector. The impression is that the DEECD is running a more inflexible line than at least some non-government schools. If the reports are right, this puts government schools at a disadvantage compared to those in the non-government sector. One metropolitan secondary school has set out the disadvantage they believe their school faces compared to an elite private school they compete against because of the stricter interpretation of BER guidelines in the government sector. Part of this concern centres around needs-based funding issues and the unnecessary narrowness of Federal Government guidelines (why not more options apart from Science blocks and Language Centres for secondary schools?).

*My issue is the criteria used by the Victorian DEECD in determining what would be allowed as a building request. Science or language centres only for secondary schools. When I looked at the final Australian school list, had our school not been a Victorian govt school with this criteria being used, we might have been allowed to gain access to the funds for the school's own wishes. Thus my theatre refurbishment project and additional music space that was about to start, funded by the school, would have been acceptable. Then I could have redirected the school based funds to improving classrooms and remodelling indoor spaces.*

*An example of unfairness! \_\_\_\_\_ Grammar School was about to start their own funded Library project and received the BER grant of \$2.5 million because it met the criteria. The school is in the process of completing this BER project and thus has redirected their own funds to other projects, e.g. water catchment for their playing fields at Bulleen. In addition, I am aware that they have received a bequest of \$1 million to fund another building refurbishment recently. Lucky them but boy, could I have done with the BER money. (metropolitan secondary school principal)*

A regional primary school is also convinced that the interpretation of guidelines by the DEECD has disadvantaged them and made them less competitive against the Catholic primary in the same small town

*Our town is unique in so much as we sit directly opposite both the Catholic schools (primary and secondary) in a very small town. Having also battled the issues of remoteness and drought, we have faced the issue of 5 (yes 5) schools in a town of around 1500 in population. Our town is home to 2 Catholic schools, 1 Brethren school and the 2 public schools. Education is the biggest industry in this small town.*

*Further to this, the Catholic system has, as we know, had full autonomy over the money and the Primary campus of St \_\_\_\_\_ [Catholic school] now sports a brand new library, new student toilets and upgrades to other buildings, all in a student population of around 110.*

*Our primary school is home to around 155 students and due to a census day 'line in the sand' only qualified for \$850,000.00. Despite this our school decided to make the most of what we could receive and attempted to work with the project management group only to find that although our school is home to an original 'Higher*

*Elementary' building of almost 150 years of age we could only get a module placed at the end of other portables.*

*Not only do we not get a say in the building, the design (a modular) is not going to work in the area we have; nor are School Council being afforded a response to many questions being asked.*

*We are totally disillusioned, we have been disadvantaged and there is absolutely no stimulus to local economy. Further to this the only benefits being seen from BER in our township is at the 2 Catholic schools who are (understandably so) making the most of having autonomy over a significant amount of money to upgrade facilities and attract new enrolments!!*

## **The Way Forward**

The BER should be seen as an opportunity to aid the regeneration and transformation of our public school system - something we believe both Federal and State Governments should be committed to. Together with the Victorian Schools Plan, the BER has the potential to develop facilities for a contemporary public school to meet contemporary learning needs. We believe that potential needs to be fully realised.

The AEU supports the focus in the BER program on new physical infrastructure being linked to dual school and community use. Schools and preschools can become a primary local meeting place for parents interested in the future of their children in a society where increasingly we have less time to meet as a community and help each other. We need to rebuild public schools so community, sporting, cultural and educational facilities are located at or near the school.

A model public school of the 21st century will have a preschool, primary school and secondary school co-located on one site with community sports ovals, swimming pool, gymnasium, theatre and library. It should also be co-located with other community resources like maternal health, childcare, and community services. It should also have the agencies, pastoral care, welfare support and special settings required by students with learning difficulties or special personal needs.

Making this happen requires a sustained and coordinated effort involving both State and Federal Governments in a genuine partnership with local schools, preschools and the community.

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