

# Dollars and sense

Schools and communities clearly welcome the federal government's economic stimulus package, but there are some concerns. **Paul Somerville** reports.

**A**fter decades of neglect, public schools are finally getting a huge injection of federal funds for new capital works and maintenance. An unprecedented \$14.7 billion is being provided to schools around the country due to an extraordinary confluence of events. In short, the Rudd government's stated commitment to an 'education revolution' has coincided with its stimulus-package response to the global economic downturn.

The Building the Education Revolution (BER) funding, to be distributed over three years starting this year, will go towards:

- Large-scale infrastructure, such as halls and libraries, for every primary, special and K-12 school in Australia.
- 500 new science labs and language learning centres for high schools with a "demonstrated need for upgraded facilities".
- Maintenance work to the value of \$200,000 in all schools.

The funding has principals and school communities very excited, says Mary Bluett, president of the AEU in Victoria. "It's the most significant investment in our schools we have ever seen by

“It's tremendous that the federal government is finally taking responsibility.... We just want it to be spent wisely.”

a federal government," she says. "It means we have not only great teachers and great curriculum, but also real hope of seeing truly modern school buildings."

To Milton Butcher, principal of Mount Lawley Senior High School, in Western Australia, the money is "a wonderful opportunity to enhance schools and improve facilities for students". He plans to use it for much needed maintenance at his school. He has also submitted proposals for a language centre, an Asian studies centre and a set of science laboratories.

At Chevallum Primary School, in Queensland, they are preparing to receive \$2.7 million to build a school hall and a library, along with an additional \$150,000 for refurbishments. "I never thought in my lifetime I'd see a school of this size [396 students] able to

have a hall and an incredible library without extensive fundraising and constant applications for subsidies," says principal Lyn Winch.

The funds will also allow the school to refurbish a double classroom and put new vinyl, a kitchen and other resources into an early-years activity centre.

## Extreme frustration

Not every response has been so positive. Some educators are frustrated at what they see as state bureaucrats' mismanagement of the BER funding.

Principals in NSW report having requests for money overruled while the education department divvies out predetermined amounts for paint or carpet whether or not a school needs them. Others say department-approved contractors are inflating their prices in the expectation that schools will be flush with funds.

Another concern is lack of transparency in departmental decisions.

"We put our submissions in, but we didn't get a cent in the first round," says Maurie Mulheron, principal of Keira Technology High School, in NSW. "We don't know why we've missed out, or even

what the criteria is. It seems that some schools are favoured over others, but the department won't give a definitive answer.

"Quite frankly, I'm furious that a school like mine—over 50 years old and in dire need of basics like paint and a sewerage upgrade—hasn't seen a single dollar yet."

Many principals in South Australia are similarly dissatisfied with the way the increased funding is being distributed, says Marcus Knill, a vice-president in the AEU SA branch. An incredibly short timeline is putting "huge pressure" on principals, he says, forcing them to make significant decisions about how to spend the extra money without being able to consult with their school communities to the level that would normally occur. There are also fears that the tight timeframe could compromise the safety and welfare of students and staff.

"Public school principals want to use their own architects and contractors, as private schools do," says Knill. "But instead, they are being compelled to use standard designs for school gyms and halls. If the end result is mediocre, or if the process is dangerous, surely the cost savings are not worth it."

Knill emphasises that, despite these problems, schools welcome the funding. They see it as overdue. "It's tremendous that the federal government is finally taking responsibility and investing serious dollars into capital projects in schools," he says. "We just want it to be spent wisely." ●

**Paul Somerville is a freelance journalist.**

## Beyond the 'beautiful numbers'

For education economist and policy analyst Adam Rorris, the education component of the federal government's stimulus package amounts to "beautiful numbers".

"Education has had a good recession so far," he told the National Public Education Forum in Canberra in March. "If you're an education economist, this has been the summer of love."

But he knows too much about the recent history of public education funding to get carried away. The "story of neglect" is that in the five years from 2002, Australian public schools had a shortfall of \$10.4 billion—or \$1.5 million per school—when compared to what they would have received had they been funded at a similar per-student rate as their counterparts in the United Kingdom and United States.

There's also the imbalance between development in the public and private school sectors.

By Rorris's calculations, the additional funds will increase per student expenditure at private schools from \$1774 in 2008 to \$3020 in each of the subsequent three years. Public school expenditure will climb from less than \$1000 to nearly \$2500.

It's a massive jump, but the public-private investment gap remains. "They're simply filling in a hole that was built up over those five years. It's significant, but it's essentially reversing



**Adam Rorris**

Education economist and policy analyst

neglect that existed before.

"It would have been relatively easy to fix this problem, [although] it would have taken some courage on the part of the government to say, 'For the private and independent sector, we will open up these funds to the poorer and middle schools, but we're excluding the top end.' I think it's important to impress upon government policymakers that it's an opportunity lost and we shouldn't make the same mistake in future."

The Commonwealth's focus on primary schools is a smart strategy, says Rorris. Their facilities are chronically underfunded and, given the tight timelines, their facilities and equipment needs are easier to specify than those of secondary schools.

However, he notes that the expenditure is spread across all schools and not targeted, when some schools have a greater need. "Also, a state like Victoria, which is well on the path of a massive construction program, is best placed to manage a scaling up of its investment. Other states are not so well placed." ●