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## APPA SURVEY: BUILDING THE EDUCATION REVOLUTION

Primary principals are mostly highly supportive of the Federal Government's Building the Education Revolution program (BER), according to a survey conducted by the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA).

The survey, conducted at APPA's Annual Conference held in September 2009 and completed by 305 principals, representing all sectors, states and territories, showed that 85% of respondents strongly supported the program while 9% gave it a low rating. This contrasts with the picture presented in some media stories, which suggest that there are serious problems with the program.

Participants were asked to rank BER from 5 (highest) to 1 (lowest) and to provide comments on the reasons for their ranking. Only 4% ranked the program 1 while over 64% ranked it 5, and 85% gave it either a 4 or 5 ranking.

Many respondents offered very enthusiastic comments, reflecting a generally strong endorsement of BER and a recognition of the educational benefits of the funding. One principal expressed a common view in saying:

*We couldn't be happier that we are able to both construct an exciting new multipurpose facility and spend great dollars to renovate, maintain and improve our school. At last we feel valued and have the finances to support the great learning we have always done at our school.*

In a number of cases, principals reported that the funding had invigorated their school communities. One principal referred to the 'great excitement engendered by this' while another noted:

*The excitement of parents, staff and kids is intoxicating. Children and teachers will thrive in these new learning areas, big, bold and beautiful.*

Many respondents pointed to specific improvements which were expected to make a difference to teaching and learning. These included purpose-built classrooms, an extra music room, a hall enabling whole school activities and indoor physical education, new computer labs, cabling in new facilities to improve IT capacity and new libraries.

Many principals referred to the effect of the construction of 'flexible learning spaces' and 'new clean, neat buildings', while one principal claimed 'the project will totally re-energise primary education in our school'.

A number of responses drew attention to the capacity to provide modern facilities. There were references to 'state of the art' classrooms, a '21<sup>st</sup> century learning environment', and 'modern, open, connected classrooms which fit a 21<sup>st</sup> century pedagogy'. In some cases, there were suggestions that the funding would enable schools to engage in the kinds of improved pedagogy they had wanted for some time: one principal referred to 'facilities to take us into the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environment we keep talking about'. Another noted that new technology facilities would enable the school to appeal to the 'digital natives in our classrooms'.

Respondents also noted that the funding would overcome persistent difficulties in their schools. One principal referred to:

*Extra spaces that will allow staff not to have to sit on stairs when there are no rooms to use to prepare work. Also use of library full time so that it does not have to be shut down when having meetings.*

Others talked about access to spaces large enough for whole school activities, or meetings of parents and community members. Some facilities would enable use by community groups, which would provide benefits to the school as well as the community. The funding would also assist through provision of spaces where children could play in wet weather: one principal noted that BER would address a situation in which 'our only covered area during rain is under a building that has posts everywhere'. There were also heartfelt references to the fact that the funding would enable schools to overcome problems such as a 'very dismal' eating area, a 'desperate' need for storage and the replacement of a 'poor quality building that contained asbestos' and a 'constantly failing heating service'.

A theme in the responses was recognition that the funding had enabled the immediate implementation of plans which had previously been only possible long-term. One principal pointed out that the program would allow the immediate implementation of plans that had been expected to take three stages and 10-15 years to complete, while another said BER 'brought our Master Plan forward by 5 years'. Others referred to the 'construction of a [multi purpose hall] that would not be possible to fund at the school level' and pointed out that 'many schools could not dream of doing what they are able to under this funding'. One comment noted:

*This money has brought forward our plans, hopes and dreams for our school by at least 20 years!!! Our whole school community is alive with excitement and the possibilities our new facilities will give to our school and our students!!*

There were consistent comments that the funding had enabled schools to gain facilities which they would never have been able to achieve, or which would have taken many years to accomplish.

Of the relatively small number who ranked the program 1 or 2, it was clear that in most cases this was because of difficulties in implementation, rather than any concern about the funding. Respondents cited such issues as the need to respond quickly to the timeline, weaknesses in their consultation processes with local communities, workload issues for principals in managing the process, difficulties in getting value for money from builders and contractors, delays in getting building programs under way because of local issues or planning approvals and in some cases a desire to spend the money in other ways (eg more teaching staff).

There were mixed views among respondents about the planning time available. Some felt that they would have liked more time for planning and consultation. One principal who rated the program highly also referred to 'terrible timelines'. Some described the process as 'extremely stressful' and lamented the 'lack of community consultation'. Others, however, suggested that 'we have great input into the design of both projects' and referred to 'ownership by staff with their input and needs addressed'. A number of principals noted that communities were excited and engaged with the project. While a few principals regarded the program as inflexible, others regarded the flexibility within the guidelines as a strength.

One issue which concerned a number of respondents, and which led to a number of low rankings, was the way in which funds were used internally in K-12 schools. In some cases, principals had used the funding for resources which would be available to high school students rather than to primary students.

Given the negative publicity which has surrounded some specific cases, it is important to note that the commentary from individual respondents was overwhelmingly positive. A significant proportion of respondents was euphoric, describing the program as 'a dream come true', 'incredible', 'a huge bonus', 'the best thing to happen to our school' and 'a never to be repeated opportunity'. Even respondents who rated the program 1 or 2 nevertheless agreed in many cases that the program would have significant benefits.

Throughout the responses there were strongly expressed views about the positive value of the program. Principals referred to 'primary schools...receiving much needed capital funding' and to the 'focus on the value of primary education' produced by BER. One principal described the program as 'a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity', while another said: 'This is the best thing that has happened to primary education'. One principal spoke for many respondents:

*This is a huge bonus – a dream come true for my school and all primary schools. My school is 90+ years old and this is a fantastic 'shot in the arm' in improving resources in our school to meet present and future needs of our staff, students and our local community of parents and businesses. My parents are so excited about this program!! They think it is the best thing to happen to our school.*

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