

Opinion Piece

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Independent Schools
Council of Australia

All schools have a role to play in Australia's economic recovery

Bill Daniels says independent schools are proving highly effective in helping build the Rudd Government's education revolution.

Surely it is no accident that the Rudd Government chose capital investment in schools as a major element of its economic stimulus package. Schools aspire to be professionally managed organisations with established volunteer structures and strong networks in the wider community. There are some 10,000 of them, right across Australia, all able to identify in seconds any number of capital projects that would improve the learning environment and educational outcomes of students.

Capital investment in schools is a direct boost to 10,000 broad-based communities. Right now, it is also the means to leverage the inherent power of those individual communities for the national good. In the face of major economic downturn, it is not surprising the Government has chosen to harness this power from all Australian schools, including independent schools. To be successful, with the broadest possible reach and greatest impact, the Government's Building the Education Revolution (BER) has to be inclusive, and embrace all school communities.

In independent schools, capital projects have always been a community effort, with little support from governments. Independent schools grow over time from small beginnings, and school facilities are largely built up through borrowings (reflected in school fees), donations and fundraising. The impressive facilities at some metropolitan independent schools signal generations of parental giving.

In the last 20 years there has been more government support to help build independent schools but, even so, over 80 per cent of capital expenditure in the independent sector still comes from families. This is in spite of the fact that the independent sector is the fastest growing schools sector. During this time the sector has nearly doubled its enrolments and now educates some half million students.

It is therefore particularly important that the Government has chosen not to penalise private contribution in the two largest components of the BER. All school communities are eligible to participate in the School Pride and Primary Schools for the 21st Century programs irrespective of what parents have contributed out of their own pockets. Recognising community effort and encouraging private contribution in education is arguably good public policy at any time, not just during a financial crisis.

The timeliness, efficiency and effectiveness with which the independent sector has been able to realise its part in the BER further justifies the Government's inclusive policy.

Independent schools are so named because they are individually governed by their own boards or councils. Their operations are regulated by governments, but their decision making and management is localised. They have the autonomy to build the facilities their communities deem as having priority. They are free to hire the most appropriate contractors to construct those buildings, and at the best price. Importantly, because independent schools have to ‘grow their own’ buildings, and are directly responsible for their maintenance, they have expertise in all aspects of facilities management.

Independent schools are directly responsive – and answerable – to their communities. Fee-paying parents who also volunteer their time in fundraising quite understandably want to see value for money in any new or refurbished facilities. The expectations of their communities act as a very strong form of accountability on independent schools.

Independent schools are therefore well positioned to help realise the economic and educational goals of the Government’s BER program. They are successful educators, effective financial managers and proven community builders. Their autonomy gives them the freedom and flexibility to help kick start the BER in diverse communities around the nation, and create a difference in those communities in the shortest possible time.

OECD research firmly links school autonomy with student academic achievement. As the BER program unrolls, it is showcasing further the strengths of autonomous, self-managing schools and clearly justifying the Government’s decision to invite all independent schools to partner with it in building the education revolution.

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