



Grapevine

BLOW-OUT OR TOP-UP?

The media described an additional \$1.69 billion to be spent by the Commonwealth government through its stimulus spending on primary school infrastructure as a ‘blow-out,’ but according to Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education Julia Gillard, it’s the result of excessive demand. ‘Trying to pretend to Australians that there are cost blow-outs...simply isn’t true,’ Gillard said in a doorstep interview in August. ‘When we budgeted for this plan, we budgeted on the basis that 90 per cent of primary schools would take up our offer to source funding to support jobs in their local community and to be building new school facilities,’ Gillard explained. ‘As it’s turned out.., almost 100 per cent of primary schools have taken the opportunity.’ A progress report by the Commonwealth Coordinator General on the scheme indicates that \$1.5 billion was shifted from the budget for environmental and social housing programs.

INSTITUTING TEACHER QUALITY

The Australian Capital Territory will join the rest of Australia when it gets a Teacher Quality Institute, to be operational by 2011, that will register teachers in government and non-government schools in the ACT and accredit teacher training courses. The ACT is the last jurisdiction to create a teacher registration or accreditation body. Somebody answering to Position Number 17,943 began ‘leading and managing the project that develops and implements the ACT Teacher Quality Institute’ last month and will continue doing all the usual consulting with key stakeholders, preparing advice for the minister and advising legislation writers, and ‘managing the transition to the implementation of a teacher registration process’ through to 20 December 2010, with a possibility of extension.

BIG IDEA

There are 40 nations in the world that are ‘heavily indebted poor countries,’ according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), 33 of them in Africa, despite the

fact that the continent as a whole receives roughly \$50 billion in aid, money that naysayers believe isn’t really aid at all. The main problem? Pouring money into Africa doesn’t change the poverty cycle, put kids in school or put food in their stomachs, although that’s exactly what a novel pilot program called the Basic Income Grant (BIG) is trying to do in Otjivero, a village in Namibia. Namibia is not one of the IMF’s 33 ‘heavily indebted poor countries,’ although half the country’s population lives below the international poverty line, but with a stable parliamentary democracy, it’s an ideal nation in which to trial the BIG approach. A coalition of German aid organisations, called the BIG Coalition, is funding a simple idea in Otjivero: paying every person in the village a basic income of 100 Namibia dollars – about \$15 – a month. If it works, the idea is to roll out the program, funded from tax revenue. According to Dialika Krahe, writing in *Der Spiegel*, the pilot is working. The funding has created a market economy in and beyond the village. Child malnutrition is down from 42 to 10 per cent, and 92 per cent of children now attend the village’s single school, because their parents are able to pay the tuition fee of 40 Namibia dollars per child each month. The school uses the revenue to buy paper, pens and printer ink.

LINKS: www.bignam.org

A TOUGH ROAD AHEAD

‘The future belongs to the nation that best educates its citizens,’ United States president Barack Obama claims, while German chancellor Angela Merkel calls education the ‘central task for the next century.’ The trouble, according to the *Washington Post*’s Nikolas Foster, is that what he calls the great recession is testing the rhetoric. ‘If...the future belongs to the nation that best educates its citizens, it will be a tough road ahead for the recession generation currently in school,’ Foster observed. ‘Apart from burdening US students with paying off the fiscal expansion, laying off teach-

ers’ – 25,000 in California alone – ‘further diminishes their ability to compete in a world demanding highly-trained professionals. Perhaps they should be the ones protesting in the streets.’

A TOUGH ROAD AHEAD – FOR TEXTBOOKS?

‘In five years, I think the majority of students will be using digital textbooks. They can be better than traditional textbooks.’ So said William Habermehl, superintendent of the Orange County school system in southern California in the United States. ‘We’re still in a brick-and-mortar, 30-students-to-one-teacher paradigm,’ he told the *New York Times*’s Tamar Lewin, ‘but we need to get out of that framework to having 200 or 300 kids taking courses online...whenever they want. I don’t believe that charters and vouchers are the threat to schools in Orange County. What’s a threat is the digital world – that someone’s going to put together brilliant \$200 courses in French, in geometry by the best teachers in the world.’ Speaking for Pearson, the largest textbook publisher in the US, Wendy Spiegel told Lewin, ‘We believe that the world is going digital, but the jury’s still out on how this will evolve. We’re agnostic, so we’ll provide digital, we’ll provide print, and we’ll see what our customers want.’ Maybe she doesn’t believe California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger is serious about his Digital Textbook Initiative to cut purchases of print-format textbooks in favour of digital formats in a bid to plug a budget hole of \$28.8 billion. ‘California’s Digital Textbook Initiative gives school districts high-quality, cost-effective options to consider when choosing textbooks for the classroom, not only during these difficult economic times but in the years to come,’ Schwarzenegger said in August. ‘This represents an important step toward embracing a more interactive learning environment that leverages technology to meet the changing academic needs of California’s students.’

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