The Commonwealth government announced a $42 billion stimulus package last month in an attempt to keep Australia out of recession, with $14.7 billion of that earmarked for building or upgrading buildings in Australia’s 9,540 schools.

Called Building the Education Revolution, the $14.7 billion is to be delivered through the cooperative efforts of Commonwealth, state and territory governments, and the non-government school sector, and is expected to commence this year and continue over the next three years.

The program was warmly welcomed across the education sector.

The bulk of the money, $12.4 billion, is earmarked for building or upgrading large-scale infrastructure in all primary schools, special schools, and Kindergarten to Year 12 schools.

New school buildings will include libraries and multipurpose halls. The funding comes with a requirement that such facilities are made available for community use at no or low cost.

Secondary schools can compete for a slice of a $1 billion pie for the building of up to 500 new science laboratories and language learning centres in schools with a demonstrated need, readiness and capacity, with construction expected to be completed by 30 June 2010.

A further $1.3 billion is earmarked for refurbishing existing infrastructure and undertaking minor building works in schools, with every Australian school to receive up to $200,000, subject to its size.

The Commonwealth government also announced it would bring forward an additional $110 million to fund round two proposals of the Trade Training Centres in Schools Program.

The measures are part of an overall package amounting to $42 billion that the Commonwealth government hopes will cushion the economy during the global financial downturn and keep Australia out of recession, while protecting jobs and improving infrastructure.

Other measures include a $950 back-to-school bonus for each eligible child between the ages of four and 18 years. The bonus comes on top of payments already provided through the Education Tax Refund, which gave families that receive Family Tax Benefit Part A a 50 per cent refund for education expenses of up to $750 for primary school students and $1,500 for high school students.

A further $511 million training and learning bonus will be available for about 440,000 students receiving a youth allowance, Austudy, Abstudy or Sickness Allowance or Special Benefits – amounting to a one-off $950 to put towards tuition fees, books and other education or training costs for the 2009 academic year.

Additional measures include:

- $1,500 for pre-schoolers
- A 30 cent in every dollar investment tax break for small and general businesses
- $950 bonus to workers earning $100,000 or less, a $950 bonus to single income families, and a $950 bonus to drought-affected farmers and farm-dependent small business owners.

According to Treasury forecasts, the economy would contract in the 2009-10 financial year without the massive funding injection. Treasury expects the stimulus package to help the economy grow one per cent this year. The International Monetary Fund expects a collective contraction of advanced economies of two per cent in 2009.

The Commonwealth government is facing a shortfall of $115 billion in tax receipts over the next four years as a result of the financial downturn, which means that in order to fund the $42 billion package it will post a deficit of $35.5 billion for the 2009-10 financial year, $34.3 billion the 2010-11 financial year and $25.7 billion for 2011-12.

While the education and welfare sectors understandably welcomed the stimulus package, the economic verdict on the potency of stimulus measures was mixed, while on the question of whether the package will keep Australia out of recession, the jury was out. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said he could not promise the package would stem the effects of the economic crisis.

‘There are no guarantees in this whatsoever because we are in uncharted economic waters,’ he said.

Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull said the Coalition would not support the package, saying Commonwealth government was trying to rush the package through Parliament without giving Coalition and crossbench senators time to consider it.
Cyberbullying: significant progress required

Many schools are hesitant about encouraging online interaction for learning, and should base their decision making about the provision of interactive online spaces on research, rather than on media reports. That’s the conclusion of Damian Maher, a lecturer in the School of Education at Macquarie University who was a primary school educator for 20 years.

Publishing his research into the bullying practices of primary school children aged 11 to 12 years in ‘Cyberbullying: an ethnographic case study of one Australian upper primary school class,’ in Youth Studies Australia, Maher reported that, ‘Currently it appears that a significant proportion of teachers do not use or understand interactive online technologies. As a consequence, significant progress in this area is required.

‘In schools, education can play an important role in helping to minimise and manage cyberbullying. It is important that policies and curriculums be developed that incorporate the use of interactive technologies such as email and chat rooms. Appropriate training for teachers also needs to be developed so that there is an understanding of the educational issues in relation to cyberbullying and how these issues can be best addressed if they arise.’

Maher found that cyberbullying occurs during both school-based and home-based interactions, that many students who bully at school are also likely to bully online. Although both boys and girls instigate cyberbullying, boys were more aggressive in their online interactions and bully each other online more than do girls.

‘Analysis of the data of instances of cyberbullying indicated that it was occurring both during home-based informal interactions and during school-based formal interactions,’ Maher reported. ‘Examination of the data from home-based interactions revealed that only boys were cyberbullied, whereas both boys and girls were cyberbullied in school-based interactions.’

Maher’s Australian findings reflect American research by Sameer Hinduja and Justin Patchin, reported in Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing and responding to cyberbullying, that most targets of cyberbullying know who is bullying them and have an existing social relationship with the bully. The most common place in which that existing social relationship germinates into a bullying relationship is school.

LINKS: www.acys.info/journal

Australia’s worst bushfires

From late on one of the hottest ever days in Victoria, 7 February, 2009, into the night and a black morning on 8 February, the death toll from Australia’s worst natural disaster began after bushfires devastated communities across the state, with Kinglake, Strathewen, St Andrews and Marysville on Melbourne’s northern fringe all but destroyed. Many people died in these and other small communities.

Strathewen Primary, near Kinglake, and Middle Kinglake Primary School, as well as Marysville Primary were razed. Seventy-two government schools were closed. South of St Andrews, Eltham College offered immediate support for locals.

To donate to the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund partnership between the Victorian and Commonwealth governments and Red Cross, visit www.redcross.org.au/vic or call 1800 811 700.