

Principals question 'missing' million

- May 8, 2009

Were primary schools short-changed in the state budget?

School principals are alarmed that \$30 million of promised Commonwealth funds for primary schools may have gone missing from last week's Victorian budget.

The president of the Victorian Principals Association, Gabrielle Leigh, says school leaders expected the money - about \$100 for each student - to be included in the base funding for schools.

"It's very disappointing and concerning because our understanding was that the money would appear tagged in the state budget," Ms Leigh says. "Primary-school principals were expecting they would get an extra \$100 per student in their global school budgets to go towards the specific needs of their own schools.

"Instead it seems the federal money may have been absorbed within the programs announced in the budget."

Primary-school leaders were elated last year when the federal education minister, Julia Gillard, announced the extra money to end an unfair practice in which state primary schools received a smaller proportion of funding per student than state secondary schools.

The money - an additional \$635 million over four years - became available to state and territory governments from January as part of the National Education Agreement.

In March Ms Gillard wrote to the Australian Primary Principals Association to reassure it the money would reach primary schools. She said that while the Commonwealth could no longer direct the states to pass the money to primary schools, "it is the Australian Government's strong expectation that they will do so".

"I have written to all state and territory education ministers to highlight the expectation that this additional funding will be used to support primary schooling," she wrote.

However, Ms Leigh says the State Government's failure to identify the money in its budget documents meant the money could have been used to fund initiatives for other education programs or sectors. "There is no way we can be confident the money is being used as it was intended, to boost funding for each primary-school child."

Ms Leigh has written to the state education minister, Bronwyn Pike, asking her to clarify where the money will be spent. She will also write to Ms Gillard to raise concerns about the budget process.

Cameron Scott, a spokesman for Ms Pike, says the budget provided a large injection of money for primary schools.

"The funding equates to around an additional \$588 per primary student over the next five years, well in excess of the \$100 increase requested.

"The Victorian Government has for years distributed school funding based on a system that targets our funding to best address a variety of student needs and that will continue."

The State Government says the \$1.7 billion it allocated to education, together with Federal Government spending, add up to more than \$2.5 billion - the biggest investment ever made in Victoria's schools.

"Given the difficult economic circumstances it's been a positive result for education," says Brian Burgess, president of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals.

"We're very pleased with the investment in infrastructure, with the extra \$15 million for VET in schools, and the extra \$7 million for computers."

In other budget measures the Government announced \$12 million to build three specialist centres for maths and science teaching. Maths and science has become a weak area in school curriculums due to a shortage of qualified teachers and a decline in senior students studying the disciplines.

The centres will be built at Belmont High School in Geelong, La Trobe Secondary College at Macleod and in Werribee at a site yet to be announced. They will operate independently from the schools whose sites they share and will offer programs for students statewide. The centres will also provide professional development for teachers.

Professor Hyam Rubinstein, chairman of the Australian Academy of Science's national committee for the mathematical sciences, says the new centres will be important for Victorian students to keep up with an increasingly competitive international environment.

"If you look at rapidly developing countries, they're putting enormous resources into schooling and we have got to maintain our standing. Unfortunately, in the mathematics area there's a shortage of really top-quality teachers . . . so to have this focus on additional training . . . and the development of suitable materials is an excellent step."