

•

August 01, 2009 12:43am AEST

Sorry, but those 'colourful claims' are the real thing

Justine Ferrari | August 01, 2009

Article from: [The Australian](#)

JULIA Gillard expects to be congratulated, not scrutinised, for presiding over the biggest school-building program in the nation's history.

The Rudd government expects to be able to spend \$14.7 billion of taxpayers' money without being held to account for how that money is being spent, and if it is a wise investment.

Principals, teachers, parents and state governments are expected to be so grateful for the truckloads of money being poured into their schools that they should not question the facilities they are told they will get, or whether they need them or not.

Newspapers are expected to blindly applaud the government for investing in schools without performing one of their most fundamental duties, to hold government accountable, and to ignore concerns and criticisms raised by principals, parents and building industry experts.

Over the past six months, The Australian has revealed a litany of problems with the rollout of the federal government's Building the Education Revolution program: overcharging by builders, schools slated for closure getting money for refurbishment, use of "cookie cutter" templates, and schools being told they were receiving a new gymnasium when they needed a new library.

The Australian did not invent these things. Education unions, teachers groups, parents, principals, people across the education divide or of no particular allegiance voiced their concerns over the program.

But as recently as Wednesday, the Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister attacked The Australian for its "colourful claims" and accused the paper of running silly news coverage instead of fostering debate over this important piece of policy.

Ms Gillard tells principals and school communities it is a sign of the government's commitment to education that it chose schools as the biggest beneficiaries of the stimulus package.

Primarily, however, the program is about stimulating the economy, and the investment in education is a secondary factor, something that both Kevin Rudd and Ms Gillard have said.

The speed with which the program has been rolled out is behind much of the criticism, but the government continually says speed is of the essence to boost jobs and the economy.

The proof that the complaints are grave enough to warrant investigation is provided by the federal Auditor-General, who announced last week he would conduct a full performance audit of the scheme.

Ms Gillard has admitted the size of the building program and its haste has caused problems. On June 12, she told ABC Radio: "We're dealing with more than 9000 schools around the country, and when you're mobilising a national effort like that, are there individual concerns and criticisms and complaints? Yes, of course there are."

On June 18, Ms Gillard said of the BER program: "It's inevitable, absolutely inevitable, that from time to time there will be problems, criticisms, concerns."

So in Ms Gillard's words, there are problems in rolling out the BER program, and it's inevitable there would be. The Australian has not fabricated that.

But by July 5, Ms Gillard had started to paint the problems as a media beat-up, particularly by the News Limited newspapers.

On Network Ten's Meet The Press, Ms Gillard said: "I don't accept that there's a lot of criticism. There's been media reporting, claims made about the Building the Education Revolution program that turn out, when fully investigated, to not be true."

But less than 10 sentences later in the interview, she contradicted herself, saying: "Are there going to be

some bumps along the way? Yes, there are."

Ms Gillard then said the overwhelming feedback from school principals was positive, "and this is a direct quote from a principal in Western Australia, this has been the best time in his 40-year career in teaching. That's the kind of feedback".

However, The Australian has also received feedback from school principals, and reported on July 11 the comments of a NSW principal who said: "Principals have nicknamed it the Bloody Evil Revolution. We're sick of it. And parents see it as a rip-off and a waste of money."

The problems and concerns raised by The Australian were not judged so by this newspaper or its journalists, but by the people on the ground struggling to ensure the best outcome for their schools, by the principals, teachers and parents. Every article on this issue we published has been based on the concerns of school communities. So is Ms Gillard saying they are fabricating problems?

One of Ms Gillard's biggest criticisms of The Australian was over an article published on June 12 that reported at least 12 schools slated for closure had received millions of dollars from the BER. Four schools in Brisbane set to shut received between \$75,000 and \$125,000 for classroom upgrades, while 15 schools in South Australia set to close by 2011 and to be amalgamated into six "super schools" received similar amounts of money.

Of the South Australian schools, seven schools slated for closure were listed in the commonwealth's announcement as receiving grants for "school refurbishment". The four Brisbane schools due to close or move were also named on the BER list as being direct recipients of funding.

The South Australian education department has confirmed it only realised money had been granted to schools that were closing after the funds had already been approved.

"We went back to the schools and said, 'Hey, you are closing, it's going to be a waste of money'," a department spokeswoman said yesterday. "So we've negotiated with them (the commonwealth) to buy ICT (information and communication technology) stuff" which will be taken to the new school.

The list of schools receiving the money was published by Ms Gillard's department and is available on the BER website. It names the schools slated for closure or amalgamation as receiving the funds, not the new school it is merging with.

These are not fabrications, but publicly available information The Australian has reported.

Even more telling is the case of Victorian primary principal Harry Grosseck, who wrote to The Australian in June, exasperated by the mishandling of his school's upgrade, and who detailed claims of bungling, bullying and dubious accounting.

Mr Grosseck wrote his account while locked in a bitter wrangle with the state education department, which began after his school requested a library and six classrooms with its \$3m funding but was instead offered a second gym worth about \$2.1m.

"In my opinion, the Rudd government's incredibly short timeline has been the weapon that our state authorities have used to pressure government school principals into accepting deals that they know in their hearts to be short-changing their schools," he wrote.

Today, The Weekend Australian reports that since going public with the problems facing his school, Mr Grosseck will now receive the library and classrooms he wanted in the first place. He is urging his colleagues around the nation to speak out to ensure schools get the facilities they need and not what is dictated by education bureaucrats. Ms Gillard cannot deny the truth of Mr Grosseck's words.

Copyright 2009 News Limited. All times AEST (GMT +10).