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Senate F&PA Committee

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School survey extended to alter findings

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THE response of government primary school principals to the controversial \$16.2 billion school building program was watered down in the Commonwealth Auditor-General's report.

The Auditor-General originally asked 7951 primary school principals who were receiving money for new halls, libraries, gymnasiums or other buildings to volunteer their thoughts about the program last September.

His office designed the survey and methodology, but a private company, Orima Research, conducted the research. Orima is a big beneficiary of government contracts, run by a former senior economic adviser in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Szymon Duniec.

As many as 3100 principals of primary schools responded to the survey request about the Building the Education Revolution, of which 75 per cent were public schools. Many of the comments were far from flattering.

Instead of using this raw data alone, Orima contacted more principals in October to ensure a "broader representation" of participating schools rather than "passionate outbursts".

A select sample of 620 principals was chosen from the augmented list to ensure a statistically robust response rate and representative result. Government schools made up a smaller percentage in this select sample - just 40 per cent, even though they comprised 71 per cent of all program recipients.

A former senior education official, Jim McMorrow, said he had doubts the final survey results would adequately represent the views of principals.

"Even with weighting you have to be careful to get the right balances," he said. "It seems unusual to approach it in that manner."

Elsewhere, the report had noted that a majority of independent schools that had taken the design, tendering and implementation into their own hands were more satisfied on questions of value for money.

Public schools, most of which accepted a "cookie cutter" choice of building, were far from happy. In fact, 65 per cent of the mainly government school principals said they could not agree that they got value for money with the building templates.

"Concerns about value for money predominantly arise in the case of schools that have had the design and construction of BER P21 works procured by their Education Authority, rather than those who procured these services themselves," the report says.

The federal Education Minister, Julia Gillard, used one quote from the survey in her response to the Auditor-General's report on the building program, released on Wednesday, saying that "more than 95 per cent of school principals saw the program as providing ongoing value to their school and their school community".

The objective of the audit was to examine the effectiveness of her department in establishing the program and monitoring its progress. It highlighted construction delays, inflexible bureaucracy and inadequate monitoring arrangements.

In an email response, Orima said the sample size of government schools was changed to be statistically proportional.

A spokesman for the Auditor-General said the office has a policy of refraining from media comment.

The Building the Education Revolution Implementation Taskforce, which is reviewing complaints about the rollout of the program, says complaints can be registered at its website, www.bertaskforce.gov.au.

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This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/school-survey-extended-to-alter-findings-20100507-uj09.html>