

EMBARGOED AGAINST DELIVERY
AT 3.30PM



PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
ST JEROME'S SCHOOL - SYDNEY - 10 MARCH 1985

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me much pleasure to be here today to open these major extensions and renovations at St Jerome's Primary School.

As your local Member, John Mountford, has told me, today marks an important stage in the history of the school - for its students, its dedicated staff, and the parents and community it has served over the last 53 years.

The opening today recognises the place St Jerome's has won for itself in Punchbowl. It reflects your community's concern for the kind of schooling seen as vital to prepare your children for a changing world, and the energy and enthusiasm put into that vision.

St Jerome's School embodies that vision. You have every reason to be proud of your students and the contribution they have made to national and local life.

One of them is John Mountford who has represented Banks in the Federal Parliament since 1980, following his earlier distinguished service as an Alderman and Mayor of Canterbury. Another link was Eris O'Brien who was associated with the school's establishment in 1952, and went on to become Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn.

As I look around the school today, I can see what an excellent job of construction and renovation has been done on the school premises. Clearly, you are trying, successfully, to provide the kind of environment and facilities needed for both students and staff to achieve their best results.

Construction is for the future, and the future requires confidence, not least confidence in the future place of a school such as St Jerome's in the development of Australia's education system.

As you know, over recent years there has been a great deal of debate over the future of that system, and in particular the future of Commonwealth assistance for non-government schools. Much of that debate stemmed from parent's concern over the way their children should be educated and the kind of values they wish to see

associated with that education. The policy my Government announced last year recognised these concerns.

It acknowledges the existence of a dual education system in Australia. It recognises too that education is a partnership between the school community and the State and Commonwealth Governments.

On the Commonwealth side, that policy is intended to ensure, among other things, that Australia has a national education system which can cater for the diversity of our society - diversity of abilities, aspirations and needs. Non-government schools have a secure place in that system.

Our policy is intended too, to ensure that assistance should be on the basis of need. You will agree I am sure that in the interests both of equity, and of making the best use of the education dollar, that the neediest schools should receive the greatest assistance.

The new funding basis which is taking effect in 1985 will have the effect of reducing over time the resource gaps between different schools. Schools that are relatively disadvantaged will receive very considerable increases in resources over the next 8 years, based on a new assessment of needs and tied to a common measure of resources across both government and non-government schools. For non-government schools that are in level 12, the neediest category, these increases in per pupil grants will range up to 45 per cent by 1992, over and above the rate of inflation.

We have managed to set this policy in place despite the very stringent overall budgeting constraints on the Commonwealth Government.

St Jerome's will benefit very materially from this policy.

In 1984 Commonwealth grants to the school to assist with operating costs were close to \$394,000. In 1985, I understand St Jerome's will be classified as a Category 10 school under the new scheme. By 1992, the school's grants will have increased by 41 per cent over and above increases necessary to account for inflation.

The Commonwealth also recognises that some schools have very special needs to meet. I understand, for example, that here at St Jerome's Primary School you have students from some 13 different countries. This variety makes for a lively mix of different cultures and viewpoints, and offers the opportunity to enrich the education of all children at St Jerome's. It also presents a challenge to teachers, in ensuring that all students can receive the grounding in common experiences and learning skills necessary for them to succeed as Australians later in life.

The buildings being opened today are the result of a major co-operative effort. They will provide much needed new and upgraded facilities, including extra classrooms, a canteen, and ESL and kindergarten areas. I am pleased to note that the Commonwealth has been able to contribute over \$450,000 towards the overall cost.

The contribution made by the school itself, by parents and friends to the project, emphasises your own commitment to the future of St Jerome's and to the quality of education it provides.

My concern with education, and that of the Federal Government, goes beyond the question of financial resources, to the quality and relevance of the education being offered in our schools. This emphasis is central to the investigation being carried out by the Commonwealth's Quality of Education Review Committee, a group of eminent educationalists chaired by Professor Karmel. This Committee's task is to develop strategies designed to ensure that extra funds - taxpayers funds - being invested in schools are used more effectively, to produce better educational standards among our students - both primary and secondary.

One Area the Committee has been looking at is how to ensure that the increasing number of students staying on to upper secondary level have the kind of skills needed for them to take up employment or higher education opportunities in the modern Australian economy. We place the highest priority on tackling these problems, especially in this year, International Youth Year.

All this begins here, at primary school. Primary schools have an essential part to play in ensuring that all their students leave Year 6 with acceptable levels of basic skills, in literacy, numeracy, and communications. Satisfactory levels of attainment in these skills are vital : they provide the foundations for all further study.

The Catholic Church's appreciation of these realities, is well known. I have welcomed the Catholic authorities' co-operation with the Government and their contribution to the development of a fair and effective education policy. I look forward to continuing consultations with your Church leaders on the issues involved.

It gives me now great pleasure to declare these new facilities open. I wish all those associated with St Jerome's well for the future.
