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a space oddity

By Matt Dunn

IT'S a massive building with few students, books, equipment or anything else that would mark it as a school.

And it's clear to anyone who walks through its doors that there is something terribly wrong.

Overseen by the Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development Maxine Morand, the Bass Coast Specialist School in Wonthaggi is a \$4.3 million building that seems as lifeless as a dormant relic.

Member for Bass Ken Smith said it was "a beautiful building, but not much else".

The *Star* visited the school last Wednesday, as Mr Smith and the school's principal Sue Campbell showed Shadow Minister for Education Services Martin Dixon around.

They strolled through the vast hallways and empty high-ceilinged rooms as Ms Campbell talked about her hopes for the school.

Without more students, funding will not come. Without funding, there will be no equipment. The vast grounds have no trees or shelter. A trampoline, donated by Rotary, is the only thing that suggests the space is there for the enjoyment of children.

Mr Dixon said it was a situation that would not occur in metropolitan Melbourne. An inadequate transport system has been blamed for most of the problem. The bus does not take students, some of whom are severely disabled, all the way to the school.

Consequently there are just 20 students enrolled,

even though it is built to accommodate 84.

"It's a great facility for the few students who are here. But our primary aim is to get more kids here, and that will generate more income and more money for equipment. It's a bit like the chicken and the egg sort of situation. I'm still surprised at the lack of equipment for the children here," Mr Dixon said.

"Just because there's 20 children doesn't mean they don't deserve more. They need a playground, books, just the things any student would expect in a school." He said a lack of proper transport was "the main issue".

"It's the right of any child who goes to a specialist school to have specialised transport available to them and I know there's only 20, but that is the right that these children have got," he said.

"Having a child with special needs is a massive burden on families. Many are single parents. They haven't got much money, they may not have reliable transport and that means there's an even greater call for transport. Even if it's a compromise while there are 20 - a few pick up spots where parents can

take their children and pick them up.

"It just shows a lack of forethought in a way. They've built the specialist school and walked away. The forward planning hasn't been done: Where are the kids going to come from? What sort of equipment do they need? How long will it take for the school to grow?"

He said the department had failed in many of the planning basics.

"They've ticked the box of building the specialist school and now they've walked away," he said.

But a spokesman defended the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's handling of the fiasco, saying it "provided the school with funding of \$124,000 for the purchase of furniture and equipment, computers, library

establishment and other items on the same basis as all new specialist schools".

"The school is in the process of finalising purchases of this equipment. The Department will continue to work closely with the school to ensure students' needs are being met," he said.