

Australia: Residents speak out against northern NSW school closures

Kaye Tucker
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An announcement by the state Liberal-National government that it will amalgamate four schools in the northern New South Wales town of Murwillumbah has provoked widespread opposition from parents, teachers and residents in the area and more broadly.

Without any warning, Education Minister Sarah Mitchell declared that Murwillumbah Public School and Murwillumbah East Public School, which both cater for primary students, and Wollumbin High School, will be closed by 2024. Current and future pupils will be forced to attend a new kindergarten to year 12 “super-school” with a capacity for 1,500 students at the site of Murwillumbah High School.

The “Save Murwillumbah Schools” Facebook page, established by local residents to oppose the amalgamation, has been liked by more than 650 people, while a petition demanding an end to closures has been signed by several thousand. The combined P&Cs (Parents and Citizens committees) are calling on the state government to immediately halt its plans, while a motion to the same effect was passed at a local union meeting attended by teachers at the targeted schools.

The New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF), which covers public schools in the state, and the Labour Party opposition have cynically postured as opponents of the plan.

Earlier in the week, Anthony Albanese, the federal Labor leader, visited the area. His condemnations of the amalgamation and those of state Labor MPs have been hailed by the NSWTF bureaucracy.

In fact, Albanese was a senior figure in the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments that dramatically accelerated an assault on public education. This included the introduction of NAPLAN, modelled on standardised testing in US schools. Its purpose, along with Labor’s entire “education revolution,” was to force schools to compete with one another for funds, narrow the curriculum to literacy and numeracy, and align school education ever more closely with the interests of so-called “edu-business.”

Albanese has signalled that if Labor is able to form government again, the pro-business offensive against social spending will be intensified. In a speech to corporate chiefs earlier this month, he declared that Labor was “pro-aspiration, pro-entrepreneurship, pro-wealth creation and pro-growth.” In addition to the gutting of services, these are code words for a stepped-up assault on workers’ jobs, wages and conditions.

At the state level, moreover, Labor governments have sought to implement school closures and amalgamations, identical to the one being pushed by the Liberal-National government in Murwillumbah (see: “Australia: Parents and teachers protest against Gosford school merger”).

The NSWTF’s promotion of Labor, a pro-business party with a decades-long track record of attacking public education, is a warning that it is preparing to enforce the amalgamation in the face of widespread opposition. The union has primarily complained that the plans were announced without prior “consultation,” in a signal of its willingness to enter into backroom negotiations with the conservative government.

This has been the unions’ role in other school amalgamations, including in the regional NSW towns of Ballina and Griffith, where closures were implemented after the NSWTF prevented any genuine struggle by affected parents, teachers and workers.

The consequences in those towns have been disastrous, with reports indicating a massive increase in teacher workloads, further casualisation, and a deterioration of student learning. The Murwillumbah amalgamation, if it is not defeated, will have similar results. The NSWTF has indicated that as many as 20 percent of teaching positions will be destroyed if the closures proceed.

Jan, a retired teacher, told the WSW: “The schools proposed for closure have got extremely good reputations. Murwillumbah East, the one I went to growing up, has a very good learning support unit. It also has an early childhood program. The Murwillumbah Public School, I’ve only heard good things about.

“The two high schools, like all high schools, have got problems, social problems, but if the kids didn’t like one high school, they could transfer to the other one. Murwillumbah is a low socio-economic town. Most families in the area couldn’t afford to send their kids to a private school.”

Asked about community sentiment, Jan stated: “I don’t think anybody wants it, as a parent, and I certainly know as a teacher I wouldn’t want it. Here in the country, people like smaller schools where it’s more community. People know each other and if there’s a problem, you get help, but you’ll get lost in a bigger school.”

Reflecting on her own experience, she said, “I’ve taught in big schools, they haven’t been a K-12 situation, they’ve just been huge primary schools where you’ve got five classes per grade at least. You are lucky to know the other children in your grade, let alone anyone else.

“Funding resources were very poor, we didn’t get anything extra, so you had to just make do with what you had. So the government’s claim that ‘you’ll have just so many resources’ is a furphy [false story] and just to make it all sound good. There won’t be any more resources.”

Karina Bale, a parent in the area said: “For families like mine, this is a real panic situation! I’m in social housing and very grateful to have a roof over our heads, but if I can’t give my son a quality education in the area, then I am going to have to move. There are plenty of private schools around here, but they aren’t an option for a person like me, on a disability pension. Having a super school like this isn’t going to do us any favours.

“My three eldest children went to Murwillumbah East, and collectively they have had 21 years at that school. My current son is at Crystal Creek Primary, simply because Murwillumbah East, which has a Learning Support Unit, was too full to accept him. Because I have children on the spectrum, the decision to apply for high school has to be made much earlier. I was approached by the Education Department in February this year and I was asked to make a decision about where my youngest son would go to High School. He had only just begun Grade 4! It’s really hard. I don’t know what to do now.”

“They are saying that the new super school will have provisions for students with learning disabilities but I just don’t know how they are going to define the land. They are saying they will have a separate primary school on site and a separate high school, a separate day care and preschool and a separate learning support unit. I really can’t see how they are going to provide a green space if they propose these six different schools in one area.”

Karina believes the government has been planning the amalgamations for some time, “but they did not at any stage

consult with the community about the closures of our schools. What they have done is sent out junk mail and placed an ad in the local paper inviting the community to attend an online virtual information meeting. That’s insulting, not consulting. It’s not what is being said, but what is not being said that I’m really concerned about. We have got a limited amount of time to apply for consultation. We have to come up with 20,000 signatures on our petition. It is my understanding that if we don’t get those signatures, then there will be no consultation.

“We are angry. We can’t believe this is happening. A merger like this happened in Ballina. Now they are running out of space and putting in demountables. The other thing is there are so many people at the current schools—teachers, staff, groundsmen, even down to the rubbish collectors—making sure our children are looked after. If we are looking at a super school, with 1,500 to 1,600 students, what strain will that put on the mental health of the students? There are no benefits that I can see in a super-school. I would like to see \$100 million pumped into our existing schools.”

Asked about Labor’s record on public education, Karina said: “I think people forget, but I haven’t. No matter who is in power, we have to stand up and show our strength. I’m worried about jobs. Lots of teachers are worrying. I don’t think the community has the capacity to cope with more unemployment.”

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) is fighting to organise teachers, parents and students, independently of the corporatised unions, to defend schools slated for closure, and to oppose the escalating attacks on jobs, wages and conditions in the sector. The CFPE is holding an online public meeting this Sunday, November 29, at 10 a.m. (AEDT) entitled “The global fight for educator and student safety in the COVID-19 pandemic.” Click here to register and attend!

The CFPE can be contacted at:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook:

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