

Grandmother denounces Shepparton school amalgamation

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to Colleen Jones, a member of the Facebook group *Greater Shepparton Voice 4 Choice*, about the consequences of the Victorian state Labor government's school amalgamations program. Jones has several grandchildren attending public schools in Shepparton and has been active in community opposition to the government's "super school" plan.

Sue Phillips, national convenor of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) spoke to Jones. The CFPE was established by the Socialist Equality Party to unify teachers in Australia and internationally against the global assault on public education.

SP: How did the Facebook group opposing the amalgamation of the four schools come about?

CJ: Opposition started as soon as knowledge of the details of the plan for the amalgamation of the super-school began filtering through to parents. We felt that we were held back for a long time from knowing, so objections could be minimised. When Robyn Boschetti, a parent, set up the Facebook super-school page at the end of 2019, I decided that I would join up to support my grandchildren.

During 2018, there were two workshops open to the community. This was supposedly part of the consultation process. The workshops were not well advertised. Community members were asked what they would like to see in this new school, not whether they wanted it or not. There was no overwhelming support for the concept of one school on one site, not at all.

At one of the school council meetings in early February 2019, they tried to push through the plan but there was not even a quorum. They shouldn't even have held the meeting but still it went ahead, pressuring people to say yes to the amalgamation. Everyone abstained except the two deputy principal members. They then held the vote again in August, after a change in membership, and it was voted in.

The consultation process was a con, designed to prevent the parents having a say and leaving very little time to protest. In 2019 we held a protest rally—300 people attended and another 120 at a second rally. Our events have been downplayed in the media. The local paper doesn't publish our letters.

Our group has been named within the school as causing

problems, being dividers etc., but all we are doing is raising our concerns and trying to report what has been going on in the school.

SP: How would you describe the first stage of the amalgamations?

CJ: It is a disaster. Teachers are being shifted around willy-nilly, when they were promised stability. They are leaving in droves. What happens to teacher-student relationships? Not one relationship is being maintained there. The promised pastoral plan was that each child would have one teacher mentor to go through school with them. My granddaughter has already had three of these!

There is nothing that these children were promised that they are getting. They just don't follow through with wellbeing programs. We have lost two wellbeing officers who left the school in disgust.

We have children at this school receiving funding for autism, but the school wasn't aware that they were autistic. Documents have been mixed up in the amalgamation process.

Parents are desperate right now. One parent was on our Facebook page saying how their autistic child was traumatised about going to another campus. Another was told that Greater Shepparton Secondary College could not cater for their autistic child... They are trying to weed these children out.

Last week a violent student brawl happened at one of the campuses. This is not a one-off. Similar things happened last year, and my grandson said it has been happening all during the week. One boy was hospitalised with a serious head injury, as a result of the incident, with seven police cars called and ambulances. Parents are fearful that a student will be killed, and are withdrawing their kids.

SP: At the end of last year a teacher anonymously spoke to the media describing the culture at the school as "toxic." Would you agree with that?

CJ: Yes, it is, for both staff and students... The teachers are not happy with how it is being run, like a business, instead of a community. They are not getting to know their students. They are feeling left out of the whole process. They are feeling miserable, and with all the violence that has erupted, it seems it is just a call for help from students. Teachers and students have been disrupted from everything they knew in their previous

schools. They are depressed, unhappy, and came close to walking out last year.

We know of at least 56 teachers who have left. We had two teachers at the start, who stood up and said this was wrong, and they had to resign because of the treatment they got from the administration. The first 15 teachers who left Wanganui campus had a total of 400 years in teaching experience.

At the end of 2019, there were about 2,700 students due to start at Greater Shepparton Secondary College, but only about 2,400 turned up. Now we are down to about 2,100... From 700 feeder primary schools, the new school only has 400 coming. This is a terrible indictment, since we used to get at least two thirds of them.

If parents can afford to take their kids out of the school and go to private schools, they do. Some kids are going by bus to the public school in Numurkah, which is over 30 kilometres away.

The site of the super school is totally inadequate. We live in a country town with acres of land around us. The government has chosen one of the smallest sites for the super-school. Why?

It is bounded by a railway line on one side, and a major road on another. They have designed a rooftop garden, not even a full-size oval. A small oval at the back and a park across the road is what they are saying is enough space for our children to play at lunchtime. From what we can see, the rooftop garden has pool fencing around it. Parents and children are afraid that someone is going to get thrown off that roof."

SP: What has been the response of Premier Daniel Andrews' government to community concerns?

CJ: We have made it clear to Education Minister James Merlino that the community did not want a single school. He thinks we are just a small minority of people who are creating a fuss. That has been the government's position from the start. We had 2,700 people on our Facebook page who are adamantly against it. Over the weekend it has increased to over 3,000 after the student brawl. Parents are worried.

Merlino met with us on three different occasions. We told him what was happening in the schools but he did not believe what we were saying. He claimed that our schools were performing badly and it was necessary to have so-called innovation and revolutionary change in education. Already our education levels have slipped and student wellbeing is non-existent.

There have been objections to mega-schools in South Australia and now at Griffith and Murwillumbah in NSW. They seem to be having exactly the same problems we are having.

We are fighting a juggernaut that keeps moving, without listening. The government has its agenda and they are sticking to it, no matter what.

SP: An advisory committee was established in 2018 made up of principals, business representatives and the vice president of the teacher union. What has been the role of this committee?

CJ: I wasn't aware that the teacher union was on the

committee. Many of the teachers think they are supported by the AEU [Australian Education Union]. In the last weeks of last year, the union promised to do something. It wasn't until one teacher spoke out anonymously in the media that they said: "Oh, the cat's out of the bag, we had better do something." The union is part of the problem.

I do know that in the school curriculum, they have introduced business into our schools and they seem to be channelling students into remaining and working in businesses in Shepparton.

One of my grandsons was pressured and pressured, and told that he could not perform at VCE level, so he should do VCAL—that is a practical option in the senior years oriented to employment and training. He was told he hadn't done one particular term of maths in Year 9. After being pressured so much, in the end, he felt that he wasn't good enough to do VCE so he took the path of VCAL.

My younger grandson was told the same thing. He wants to be a pilot. He needs maths and science. He was told he would not cope with VCE. The following day, after being told he probably wouldn't cope with VCE Maths, he got 95 percent for his maths test.

In Year 9, students have to sign a contract to decide which educational path they are going to take. They are told they need to stick to the contract. These children are 14 years old and don't know what they want to do! The idea is to keep them in Shepparton businesses. Some want to leave Shepparton and go to university.

I know some of the teachers and kids are opposed to some of the programs being imposed, such one initiated from the Bill Gates Foundation. The Industry and Innovation subject is another one.

Students should be encouraged to excel. What is being offered here is a lower expectation of academic achievement. It is certainly not designed to improve education. Instead they are destroying it. What the government wants is a bunch of robots who don't think for themselves.



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