

Australian state Labor government's disastrous Shepparton super-school plan

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The Victorian state Labor government's moves to amalgamate four secondary schools, in the Shepparton region, into one super-school has become a catastrophe for the students, teachers and parents.

Shepparton, 180 kilometres north of Melbourne, is the fifth-largest regional city in Victoria, with a population of 66,500. It has a significant refugee population from Afghanistan, and 3.4 percent of the population identify themselves as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. It is ranked in the worst 20 regions of Australia for youth unemployment. In January 2018, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, youth unemployment in Shepparton reached 16.1 percent.

At the end of the 2020 academic year, having endured the consequences of the initial stages of the amalgamation, teachers at Greater Shepparton Secondary College threatened to take action. One teacher, speaking anonymously to journalists, condemned the "toxic culture" that was impairing the mental health of both teachers and students. The media exposure, and the threat of teacher action, led to the resignation of executive principal Genevieve Simson on December 9.

Up until 2019, Shepparton had four secondary schools. In December that year, Shepparton High School was closed and demolished, to make way for a "super school." The year 2020 was the first stage of a "transition process," in which students from all four schools were packed into the three remaining schools (Wanganui Park Secondary College, MacGuire College and Mooroopna Secondary College) while construction of the new school began at the site of the former Shepparton High. By 2022, the plan is for all students (between 2,700 and 3,000) to attend the amalgamated school, with the three other schools closed.

Since the start of the amalgamation process in 2019, 54 teachers have left Greater Shepparton Secondary, and in 2020 six teachers took stress leave.

Teachers have been randomly ordered to teach unfamiliar year levels, due to the reshuffling of students across campuses. Teachers were forcibly shunted off to other school sites, against their wishes, despite promises to the contrary. At the start of 2020, Simson informed teachers that their teaching would be subjected to an observation and performance regime.

Students and parents have also borne the cost of this "transition." Special needs programs, pastoral programs and subject choices have been slashed. Students who formerly walked or rode to a nearby school now have to be bussed for several hours each day. Some families have children attending several different campuses. During 2020, enrolments at Greater Shepparton Secondary College declined by about 200.

There were reports throughout 2020 of escalating fights between students. Tensions have been inflamed by the fact that students, formerly in four schools, are now crammed into three, uprooted from their familiar school environments and support networks. This culminated last week in a violent brawl at Wanganui campus. One student was hospitalised with a head injury, and paramedics and police had to be called.

In an Australian Broadcasting Corporation report last Tuesday, a teacher anonymously stated that incidents had been occurring since the start of the year and had escalated to the point where they were "uncontrollable." He said no-one wanted to come to work anymore. "We can't give the parents what they expect from us because we're not getting the support we need." Asked if promised extra resources of teachers and security would assist, he said: "It is a good start but the underlying problems have not gone away."

The teacher trade union bureaucracy, which backs the plan of Premier Daniel Andrews' government, remained silent throughout 2020. After Simson's resignation, Meredith Peace, president of the Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU) said: "The union will continue to work with members and the Department of Education to address specific concerns and ensure the school merger is successful."

In 2017, the government used lower than average results in NAPLAN standardised testing as a pretext to begin ramming through a pro-business restructure of public education in Shepparton. It appointed a Strategic Advisory Committee whose members included government officials, four school principals, the CEO of the Committee for Greater Shepparton—representing local business leaders—and the AEU state vice president. In other words, the AEU has worked with the government and business from the start.

Anti-democratic community meetings, fraudulently described as "consultations" were conducted in order to impose the merger. Colleen Jones, a member of the "Stop the Shepparton Superschool" Facebook group, recounted on the Save Our Schools website: "Any questions were deflected, with 'this is happening, you need to get on board,' or 'We can't answer your questions at this stage, but we are working on it.'"

Residents organised protest marches, a community crisis meeting and a petition to oppose the plan, but the Labor government steamrolled ahead regardless.

The amalgamation is part of a decades-long process, which began under the Kennett Liberal government, with the closure of more than 350 schools in the 1990s. Later it was spearheaded by the Bracks and Brumby Labor governments. Between 1999 and 2010, over 150 Victorian public schools were shut down or amalgamated. Between 2010 and 2019, the number of public schools declined from 1,548 to 1,535, despite population increase. By contrast, the number of private schools increased from 703 to 712.

State governments, Labor and Liberal alike, are pushing amalgamations. Dressed up as "innovative and revolutionary change," they entail an initial monetary outlay, but funding into the future is not guaranteed. This is proven by the experience elsewhere, such as the amalgamation of Warracknabeal's public schools, which began in 2016 but abruptly ground to a halt in 2018, when only half complete, due to a lack of

funding. Students have been forced to remain in poorly-lit rooms with leaking roofs and inadequate air conditioning since then.

The restructuring of education through the amalgamation of public schools is bound up with the refashioning of the curriculum in the interests of business. Students are increasingly channelled into programs designed to improve their "job readiness." This limits students' aspirations to a future of menial and precarious employment in local businesses, rather than any development of critical thinking or the pursuit of higher education.

Underpinning this regressive agenda is an educational model dominated by the imposition of a school and teacher performance regime, leading to increasing and untenable workloads, driving out the most experienced and knowledgeable teachers.

Chaotic transition processes, such as in Shepparton, undermine confidence in the public education system, and encourage the drift of students, whose families can afford it, from the public to the private system.

To halt the Shepparton amalgamation and similar mergers, a political struggle must be developed against the Labor government and the corporate elite. Parents, teachers and students in Shepparton need to form rank and file committees, completely independent of the AEU and all official political parties. They need to join up with other schools facing closure and amalgamation across the country.

A new perspective is required that rejects the dominance of the capitalist market over education, and defends the right of all to a high-quality public education. To take forward this fight, contact the Committee for Public Education below:

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