Australia: Teachers discuss educational disaster at Shepparton super-school

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently interviewed four teachers from the city of Shepparton in regional Victoria to discuss the amalgamation of four secondary public schools and their replacement by the state Labor government of a super-school aimed at enrolling 2,700 students onto one campus.

Since the beginning of the government's plan, educators have been sidelined and gagged by the Victorian Department of Education with the support of the Australian Education Union (AEU), which has been complicit in the entire process.

The amalgamations, despite ongoing opposition in the community, have led to an educational disaster, with resignations and early retirements of more than 80 teachers, mounting numbers of teachers on stress leave, and the dismantling of student well-being programs resulting in outbreaks of violence between students.

In early March, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) published sections of a report commissioned by the Department of Education alleging a high number of "racist incidents by teachers towards students" and "cultural exclusion." The purpose of the article was to divert attention away from the failed amalgamations and shift the blame to teachers and students (see: Australia: Leaked report slanders Shepparton school teachers for alleged "systemic racism").

The teachers interviewed have decades of experience as educators and a rich knowledge of Shepparton schools and their students. They explain that the new model has driven out longstanding teachers and disrupted the educational engagement of students. Critical student and teacher relationships have been broken up, turning upside down schools that were regarded as safe places for many disadvantaged pupils. Families who can afford it are shifting their teenagers out of the public schools, to private schools or other schools in the district.

The teachers wish to remain anonymous. We will name them by the pseudonyms Robert, Heather, Georgia and Danielle.

Georgia, a long-standing teacher of several decades, explained how teachers had been sidelined. "From the very beginning in 2019, we were told we weren't to talk about the plan," she said. "We only knew what was happening after things were reported in the newspaper.

"The consultation was a joke. All of a sudden it was announced there would be a super-school and as far as I know, no-one knew about it or voted for it. We were shocked when the principal reported it and could not answer our questions. The process was so fast you did not have time to digest the facts."

Danielle, who has taught for more than a decade, explained how teachers were pressured not to speak publicly about what was taking place. "The statements from the principal were always like this: 'You understand how much this has to work. If we are to continue, the school has to show significant growth, it has to be perfect in the public eye.' Anyone who raised concerns didn't get promotion into leadership positions.

Responding to the ABC report of alleged teacher racism, **Heather**, who has a broad knowledge of the Shepparton schools, said: "I was really angry with the ABC. They need to get their facts right. I know that not one teacher was interviewed at one of the schools. To state there were no multicultural teachers in the school was a lie. I've been teaching with a Japanese teacher for years. She's been here 20 years now. Shepparton is very multicultural and we are very good at looking after refugees and other community groups.

"The claims of racism going back years are also not true. We had 19 different nationalities at Shepparton High School and occasionally you might be called into the yard over a dispute but it was dealt with. I enjoy having all those different kids in the classroom and previously every school had an Aboriginal aide."

Robert, a teacher who was educated in Shepparton, described as misleading the ABC's claims that only 3 out of 300 teachers volunteered to be trained to assist students who have English as an Additional Language (EAL). "I believe the EAL training was voluntary and as you know everyone is totally overworked and don't want to do extra and you can't blame the teachers for that," he said. "Also, knowing the breakdown in basic communication at the school, staff probably did not even know about the training."

Georgia commented: "I don't understand why teachers haven't been given the report from the Department. I find it interesting that this report gets leaked after the student fights have started. It's like they are saying racism is the problem, to divert attention. It becomes a racial argument, not about what the real issue is, which has nothing to do with race at all.

"There is always some sort of tension in schools but before the super-school you sensed when something was about to happen between kids, whether it was racist or someone upset. It may have been something that happened at the weekend or it happened at the footy. There is always something, but it is always between 1 or 2 kids.

"Frequently, the student would speak to a staff member and it

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would be defused before it started. A teacher would have a quiet chat, you knew the families and it was resolved.

"I can see why there is a gravitation of kids into gangs of the same culture or ethnic background. They feel so scared being thrown into something they don't know, where their teachers have been dragged out from one school and pushed into another. The teacher they used to communicate with is not there.

"Most new staff are young, inexperienced and on contracts and would not even know which kids had Koori backgrounds… That is where there might be an issue because the new staff don't know the kids.

"You can't blame the kids. There was always a small group of kids who were disengaged, who had a difficult home life. They came to school every single day because school was their safe place. We had a breakfast program where they got food and someone to talk to. We would make sure they would get back into routine and some of them went on to complete their VCE [Victorian Certificate of Education]."

Teachers commented on the toxic and intimidating working environment that was imposed to divide staff, students and eliminate valued programs.

Robert described how a colleague had attempted to survey staff about their concerns in the early stages of the amalgamation, and how issues could be overcome. "Within literally minutes of emailing staff, the principal redacted the survey, cut off his internet and allowed him only to contact seven people in the school that she hand-picked… Everyone was saying we have no voice."

This was not a one-off incident, but part of a series of occurrences that led to teacher complaints to the Department, including threats of industrial action.

Programs that had been developed over years to engage students and support special needs pupils have been eliminated. **Georgia** explained: "The school I was at was very popular. Kids in years 8, 9 and 10 changed their subject choices every six months, Maths and English was compulsory. We had a vertical teaching model, including a vertical home group system. The same two teachers worked together with a home group. We saw the kids twice a day every day for the whole of the school life from year 7 to 12. The home group would have 31 to 32 kids and 2 staff.

"Twice a week in home groups we had reading for 20 minutes, or private study. Other times we would have a home group activity, play games, do admin stuff. Sometimes we had a home group day where you would go out with your home group. Year 7 would have friends in year 12, so they would have a mentor to look after them.

"We had a big integration centre for kids with special learning needs, kids in wheelchairs and so on. Those kids were mixed up in the home groups. The integration staff had an office and there was a safe place for the integration kids to go at lunch-time. In the amalgamations all the integration staff were split up. They were devastated.

"We had a great art block that kids would visit every lunchtime and three wellbeing staff had a set of offices and a kitchenette where kids could go in and see staff."

Danielle described the complex socioeconomic circumstances of some of the students, which were not considered in the amalgamations. "We are dealing with students from families suffering generational poverty, drug abuse and violence. It was as though we were setting up a school for the wealthy. We fed kids. We put blankets out for kids in winter we knew slept there. There was no thought about any of those issues."

The Department of Education claimed that the super-school was necessary because of school underperformance and low year 9 NAPLAN results. Danielle disagreed. "The Department didn't show the NAPLAN growth data, they showed selected data," she said.

"The data I saw at meetings was compared to the rest of the state. The four Shepparton schools were pitted against each other, and then the data was shown combined. What they didn't show were growth figures, nor any differentiation between EAL kids and other students, nor socioeconomic data. It was just looking at the difference between [high-ranking] schools like Melbourne High, and Shepparton College.

"And besides, we all know year 9 students like to voice what they hate when they sit for NAPLAN tests. I love my Year 9 students, however I know that they will always vote with their actions."

In 2018, a Strategic Advisory committee was established to oversee the amalgamation process consisting of some school principals, local business representatives and the vice president of the AEU.

Danielle expressed frustration and anger toward the AEU. "I remember going to meetings thinking, OK, the union will listen to our voice, and it was the opposite. They would say: 'We're working with the principal and we need to make this work. Therefore, we have to work with what the school wants, and then we will try and work for you.'

"It was completely as though the union was representing the Department. And it became very clear that they were not the people to whom we could express ideas or dilemmas. I have been a union member for as long as I have taught. It was completely devastating. The union didn't even pretend that they were there for us."

Similarly, **Heather** said the unions are "in league with the government; they haven't done anything."

Robert stressed: "The AEU is part of the problem. We have no voice on anything. This is what happens when other people decide. It doesn't surprise me that teachers were threatening to go on strike last year. It is terrible that the AEU would not support us. It seems they are part of the system and that is a problem.

"We have to have people who stand up and go against the Department. Our voice has to get bigger. All we have at the moment is the perspective of the government and the Department."

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