

Australia: Leaked report slanders Shepparton school teachers for alleged “systemic racism”

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The Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) last month published details of a leaked Department of Education internal review that accused teachers at Greater Shepparton Secondary College (GSSC) of racism and “cultural exclusion.”

The ABC article, which appeared without a by-line, came just days after violent brawls at the school in regional Victoria. These involved an emergency lockdown, with police and paramedics called and one student hospitalised.

The leaked report has all the hallmarks of a government organised provocation. There can be little doubt that the Department of Education review was leaked with the knowledge and approval of figures within the state Labor government.

The aim was to provoke a racist furore as a means of diverting public attention away from the disastrous situation within GSSC that the government is responsible for creating. Its forced merger of four public secondary schools into a new so-called super-school, despite widespread community opposition, has triggered an enormous crisis (see “Australian state Labor government’s disastrous Shepparton super-school plan”).

The leaked review—undertaken by Georgia Birch, a so-called “cross-cultural consultant”—was commissioned in May 2020, took six months to complete, and was presented to the Department of Education in November last year, outlining 47 recommendations.

The ABC article quoted from Birch’s review, accusing teachers of “racialising underachievers and trouble makers in the classroom,” of “victim blaming Aboriginal and multicultural families for their actions and behaviours towards the school,” and being “complicit” in racism experienced by students.

The report complained that the school had a “16-person all-white wellbeing team, all-white leadership team and all-white teacher staffing team,” and claimed that the school was a “culturally unsafe workplace for multicultural and Aboriginal staff.” It also reported that about 300 teachers were offered training to assist students who have English as

an Additional Language (EAL), but only three took this up.

The ABC report quoted selected extracts from Birch’s review but provided no evidence of the allegations and gave no opportunity for teachers to respond.

Most Shepparton teachers had no knowledge that an internal review into alleged racism was being carried out, and had not seen or been told about the report’s contents prior to the ABC article.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has spoken with several Shepparton teachers. One stated: “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. Shepparton is very multi-cultural and we are very good at looking after refugees and other community groups. [...] Claims of racism going back years are not true. We had 19 different nationalities at Shepparton High School, and occasionally you might be called into the yard over a student dispute, but it was dealt with.”

In reference to allegations that only three teachers took up EAL training, another teacher explained: “I believe the training was voluntary and as you know everyone is totally overworked. They don’t want to do extra work, and you can’t blame the teachers for that. Also, knowing the breakdown in basic communication at the school, staff probably didn’t even know about the training.”

Another teacher told the WSWs: “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, and not about what the real issue is, which has nothing to do with race at all.”

The real issues in Shepparton are not racial but *class* issues.

The regional Victorian city is afflicted by an enormous social crisis. In 2019, official youth unemployment was 17.5 percent and this has since escalated amid the pandemic-induced economic slowdown. The city has a severe homeless crisis, widespread poverty, and associated social

problems including drug and alcohol addiction.

Approximately 3.4 percent of the population identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander. In addition, about 10 percent of Shepparton's population is made up of humanitarian refugee entrants, largely from Afghanistan, as well as Iran, Sudan, Iraq and Congo. The government provides refugees with grossly inadequate social support, such as English-language classes and psychological health treatment.

The crisis in Shepparton public schools reflects the wider social crisis in the city. Staff are not provided with the necessary resources to manage the complex intellectual, social, and psychological needs of the student body. The government and media are instead scapegoating teachers and school staff for the situation.

The forced merger of four schools into one "super-school," a process initiated by the state Labor government in 2018, has exacerbated the crisis.

The amalgamations have seen special needs programs and student well-being programs eliminated. Critical relationships nurtured within the schools have been destroyed as teachers and students are shunted around different locations. Experienced teachers with decades of knowledge of students and the community have resigned, transferred or taken early retirement, unable to tolerate the destruction of arrangements that had been established to engage and nurture disadvantaged children. At least 80 of the schools' nearly 300 teachers have left the school, and another 12 are on stress leave.

The staffing crisis has seen reports of teachers having to supervise 60-80 students in a study session. Student enrolments have declined by over 100 students in the first few weeks of the 2021 school year. Parents who have the financial resources are withdrawing their children and sending them to private schools.

The dismantling of public schools that were once regarded as a safe and stimulating environment for teachers and students has created fear, anxiety and growing conflict among students.

In the schools, teachers were silenced by what staff have described as a "dictatorial" management, intimidating them from expressing their concerns, and threatening teachers' positions if they spoke publicly.

Complicit in this entire process has been the Australian Education Union (AEU). The union's role has been to isolate and stifle teacher opposition, ensuring that the unbearable and appalling working conditions remain unexposed. In December 2020, AEU bureaucrats discouraged teachers from taking action against what teachers described as a "bullying" and "toxic culture."

The bureaucracy's only concern is that they continue to be

treated as partners in the various governing bodies implementing the super-school. Union bureaucrats from the beginning sat with government officials, business representatives and principals as part of the government's Strategic Advisory Committee. The AEU has repeatedly made clear that they are collaborating with school management to "make this amalgamation work."

One former teacher in Shepparton told the WSWS: "It was completely as though the union represented the department—the union didn't even pretend that they were there for us."

In line with the AEU's active collaboration with the government in enforcing the new Shepparton "super school," the union endorsed the leaked report accusing staff of systematic racism. Victorian branch President Meredith Peace responded to the scurrilous ABC article by declaring that there were "significant issues that would concern our members" and insisting that teachers must be "engaged properly in the work required to address the issues raised."

The government-media-union effort to provoke racist divisions within Shepparton's public school must be opposed. Its purpose is to divert attention from the real source of the crisis, scapegoat teaching staff, divide the working class in Shepparton, and block a unified struggle of teachers, students and parents.

A political struggle must be developed to halt the disastrous Shepparton amalgamation, involving a fight against the Labor government and the corporate elite it represents. Parents, teachers and students in Shepparton need to form rank and file committees, independent of the AEU. They need to join their struggle with other public school teachers confronting similar issues of under-staffing and under-resourcing. 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.



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