

Australia: Shepparton residents speak with the Committee for Public Education about “super-school” opposition

Our reporters
28 May 2021

A Committee for Public Education (CFPE) campaign team recently visited Shepparton in regional Victoria to speak to community members about the crisis triggered by the state Labor government’s plan to amalgamate four public secondary schools into one “super-school,” enrolling 2,700 students.

Since the last report from the WSWs, the crisis has deepened. Outbreaks of violence between students have caused serious hospitalisations and forced school lockdowns involving security guards, paramedics and police. On the three campuses, Wanganui, Mooroopna and McGuire, that make up the Greater Shepparton Secondary College (GSSC), staff shortages continue to grow, including a lack of replacement teachers to cover teacher absences, with resignations and other educators taking extended stress leave.

The super-school model has eliminated well-being programs, and disrupted teacher and student relationships, leading to rampant bullying (see: “Teachers discuss educational disaster at Shepparton super-school”). The schools, once regarded as safe and engaging places for students and teachers, have been turned upside down and transformed into dangerous holding pens for students, lacking much-needed resources such as welfare professionals, counsellors and psychologists.

Parents are fearing for the safety of their children and opting to withdraw their children out of GSSC, seeking enrolment in private and independent schools. Some parents have even gone to the extent of baptising their children so they will be allowed into the Catholic school system.

Every single community member spoken to by the CFPE campaign team expressed outright opposition to the so-called super-school.

Jenny, a single mother with a secondary-aged son and tertiary-aged daughter, explained that the school amalgamations had led to terrible circumstances for her family.

“My son had a great relationship with one particular teacher two years ago, and was distressed when that teacher left at the end of that year, evidently to avoid the super-school,” she said. “He had already lost two close mates to other schools for the same reason, and grieved their loss. He feared going to Mooroopna, as did his mates, who had all heard worrying things and talked amongst themselves. They didn’t want to go there and they stayed together as a group of close mates, not a gang, but to support and protect each other and feel safer.”

She continued: “Teenage years are hard enough as it is, and relationships can be difficult. My son was then bullied by two kids from the start of the year at Mooroopna, which then triggered more fear, frustration, anger, disengagement and wagging school.”

Jenny explained that she would like to take her son out of the school but as a single mother, she cannot afford fees of at least \$4,000 a year.

Jenny also spoke about the difficult circumstance teachers confront, explaining: “Unfortunately, the school didn’t recognise the signs in my son of bullying or stress. Teachers were also stressed and under pressure. Who can blame any of them with all the upheaval? The teachers are being silenced and bullied by upper management, and there are enormous expectations on them to enforce the transition to GSSC. That’s why we see so many teachers under stress and leaving, further aggravated by violence at the school.

“It is like being put in a pressure cooker. As a parent I find it terrifying, as my child is now surrounded by all these problems. In such a toxic environment how do people learn, teach or help one another, and how can it possibly get better when all four schools merge on one site in 2022?”

Megan and **Jeffrey** are retail workers with school age children. Megan said: “We have one child at the amalgamated schools and one who’s left. My daughter left in Year 8 because she was being bullied and she nearly got jumped by a bunch of older girls with weapons who were

waiting for her to leave the Wanganui campus.”

Jeffrey said: “We have another kid at the McGuire campus. When he comes home and says he had a good day because there were no fights on campus, this is a rare occasion.”

Asked why they thought the government has created the “super school,” Jeffrey said: “The only building that they can’t sell off is the Shepparton High site. It has a historical building that you can’t modify and it’s in an industrial estate near the railway line and SPC, the large fruit cannery. They will sell all the other campuses that are in prime land for houses. I went to school at the Mooroopna campus and it was actually pretty good, but now the campus and the grounds have deteriorated.”

Asked if they knew anyone in favour of the super school, Megan and Jeffrey answered “no” in unison. Megan said: “Everyone’s really worried about their kids, really, really worried. The only kids that are going to be left at that school are the kids that couldn’t get into the other ones.”

Annie, a retired nurse, expressed relief that all her children have left school. She has friends who are teachers in the amalgamated school and explained: “I know teachers can’t speak for themselves. They are really scared. They are scared of the students and the physical and verbal abuse. They said it will be full of police and security guards. It’s shocking.”

Annie added: “I haven’t got much time for the government actually—they always use Shepparton as a trial for everything.”

This is a reference to Shepparton’s selection by the then federal Labor government in 2011 as a trial site for punitive welfare “reform” measures, including the forced “quarantining” of 50 percent of some welfare recipients’ incomes, with only pre-approved purchases permitted through a government-issued “basics” card.

Jack lives on a farm out of town. He took his Year 7 son out of the “super school” and now sends him to a Catholic school where parents have to pay about \$4,500 per year. Jack was concerned that the amalgamated public school would be too large and crowded for his son. Like everyone the CFPE asked, Jack said he did not know anyone who supports the super school.

“The biggest thing now is that you don’t have the choice within the public system. The government is doing this to save money. They think they can have fewer teachers to teach the same children. They give money to the Catholic system, then they don’t have to administer it from there on,” he explained.

Robert, a Year 12 student, commented on the recent fights among students. He said: “Kids aren’t getting on. I get to finish before we are all put together on one school, but my

brother who’s in Year 10 will be going there next year. I reckon he’s not going to be safe. Before the amalgamation it wasn’t as bad because people weren’t moving around. My brother had to go to Mooroopna even though we live in Kialla, which is about six kilometres away. They made him move.”

Tania, a secondary student who lives in Shepparton, now attends school in Numurkah, a 30-minute drive away. She said: “My experiences at the ‘super school’ made me want to leave. At the end I was sad and depressed and didn’t want to go to school anymore. I was put in a new class without any of my friends and was getting picked on by the other girls. There was a lot of fights and it was really rough.

“I couldn’t learn in the classroom because it was too noisy. Kids were throwing chairs and just walking out of the classroom all the time and not going to class. We learned more at home when it was lockdown. I wanted to leave the school because there were so many kids. Moving to the new school next year really worried me a lot, because it is so big. At my new school the teachers know who I am and help me when I need it. I want to go to school now.”

Marg said one of her children is due to start high school next year, and her partner is getting a part-time job to afford the annual fees to send them to the Catholic secondary school.

Marg explained: “If GSSC was a normal high school, like McGuire or Wanganui, our kids would have gone there. But now there’s way too many students in one school. When my children can’t handle a classroom with 25 people, how are they going to handle a playground with over a thousand? Five of our kids have disabilities. I reckon I’ll have to home school them. Another child has gone to live with her grandmother in Lakes Entrance, which is a six-hour drive away. She has autism and ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder] and can’t handle large groups.”

Marg described the stark choice her family was facing. “We are going to have to look at moving as we can’t afford to send them to private school and our kids will not survive in the ‘super school.’ A lot of kids are already having trouble with mental health. You can’t do ‘one size fits all.’ Kids will get lost in the system. There will be a lot of kids that drop out as soon as they’re old enough to. Kids already have trouble with drugs and teen pregnancies and are dropping out early. This is going to make it a hundred times worse.”



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