

Australia: Murwillumbah schools merger accelerates attack on public education

Erika Zimmer**15 June 2021**

The New South Wales (NSW) government this month arrogantly dismissed widespread opposition from parents, teachers and residents to its plan to amalgamate, without any community consultation, four public primary and high schools in the northern regional town of Murwillumbah.

Education Minister Sarah Mitchell told the media that the Liberal-National government had “made its decision.”

Last October, Murwillumbah residents heard, via the media, Mitchell’s announcement that the Murwillumbah Primary School and Murwillumbah East Primary School, along with two public high schools—Murwillumbah High School and Wollumbin High School—would be merged into a single Kindergarten to Year 12 “super school.” The mega-school was planned to be operational by 2024.

The merger of the four schools represents a stepping up of the bipartisan government agenda to further erode public education in Australia. While mergers of public high schools have been carried out in both city and country areas in recent decades, the Murwillumbah merger takes this to a new level, by amalgamating both primary and secondary schools onto a single campus.

Wollumbin High School Parents & Citizens president Soenke Bierman told the local media that, while the minister had finally found the time to come up to the area, after first being invited six months ago, it was only to tell a handful of people in a closed-door meeting that the amalgamation would go ahead as planned.

“So much for consultation,” Bierman said. “Imagine not even talking to the community before making such a radical decision, and now saying we are being consulted because we might get to pick the colour of the carpet in the new building. This was an actual example the minister used.”

The WSWS spoke to parents and residents about the amalgamation.

KB, a parent, said: “I think because Wollumbin High is on a hilly site, it would make a perfect new housing site. I think the amalgamation is to free up housing land.

“The new school is all going to be on the same site. Has the NSW government actually purchased or leased, to extend

the high school grounds so there is more green space? Unless they do something about that site, it will seriously flood, and they are looking at massive problems with drainage to make sure it’s safe green space for the kids.”

Malcolm Clarke, a resident, commented: “The belief in the community is that it is about the government saving money. Personally, I think it is likely that the government has a longer-term agenda, aimed at ensuring all education is totally in the hands of non-government operators.

“All indications are that this planning has been taking place for years, despite the state government promising upgrades to Murwillumbah East and Murwillumbah Primary. I believe parents able to afford to take their children to Catholic and other private schools will do so.

“The public system will be reduced to attempting to cope with children from low socioeconomic families and children rejected by the non-government schools. We are already seeing private schools expanding.”

Local state and federal Labor Party and Greens politicians claim to be “up in arms” about the decision to effectively close three public schools. However, the move flows from the bipartisan federal and state government agenda to privatise education.

After decades of funding cuts to public schools and generous allocations to private schools, this agenda was escalated in 2008 by the federal Labor government’s “education revolution.” Its centrepieces included the high-stakes NAPLAN testing regime and the accompanying MySchool website, which revealed the growing gap between advantaged and disadvantaged schools, now one of the widest in any OECD country.

Increasingly, what has been created is a two-tier system, with public education—apart from a few “showcase” schools—being transformed into schools of last resort for parents unable to afford private school fees.

Since 1985 enrolments in private schools have grown at five times the rate of public schools.

A recent paper by the Gonski Institute for Education at the University of New South Wales helps explain this shift.

Working from the latest 2018 MySchool data, it details the gulf in government funding for public and private schools. In Adelong, a small country town in NSW, students enrolled in the public school attract \$15,951 each, in annual government recurrent funding. In the nearby private school, each student attracts \$23,923.

The Murwillumbah blueprint deepens a national process. The Kennett Liberal government, in the state of Victoria, began the closure of government schools, shutting more than 350 during the 1990s. The subsequent Bracks and Brumby Labor governments closed or amalgamated over 150 Victorian public schools between 1999 and 2010.

In 2019, the current Victorian Labor government moved to merge four high schools into a Greater Shepparton Secondary school, with an enrolment of up to 3,000 students planned. In Shepparton, like Murwillumbah, the consultation process was a sham, and there is intense public opposition to amalgamation. Teachers have left the school in droves, describing its culture as toxic. Enrolments are declining, and promises for facilities have not been kept.

In NSW, Bob Carr's state Labor government announced plans to close or amalgamate up to 10 public schools in metropolitan Sydney in 2001. A decade later, a confidential report handed to the Labor government identified savings that could flow from the amalgamation, or closure, of 80 primary and secondary schools throughout the state.

In 2019, the current Berejiklian state Liberal-National government merged two high schools in the Riverina region, Griffith High School and Wade High School, into the Murrumbidgee Regional High School. Twenty teachers walked out of the amalgamated school last December, reporting that many of their colleagues had resigned. In the first year of the new school's operations, up to 1,000 separate classes took place without a teacher.

In 2006, the South Australian state Labor government announced plans to close dozens of public schools and merge them into larger schools, a move that followed 65 school closures, carried out by the previous Liberal state government.

Teachers have been gagged from commenting on the amalgamations by Code of Conduct stipulations. However, social media groups have denounced the "super-school" plans. Petitions calling on governments to halt the ongoing amalgamations have been signed by thousands.

This regressive agenda has only been able to proceed because of the role of the teachers' trade unions. The Australian Education Union (AEU) has worked with the Victorian Labor government on the plans to merge Shepparton schools from the start, and has assured the government it will continue to "ensure the school merger is successful."

When teachers at the merged Murrumbidgee Regional High School walked out over unbearable workloads, the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) refused to back their campaign. Petitioners on Facebook said the union would not support or publicise the teachers' demands. Others pointed to the NSWTF's record in imposing amalgamations elsewhere, including the regional cities of Dubbo and Ballina.

When the NSW government backflipped on its promise to protect staffing entitlements for the Murwillumbah merger, the NSWTF contemptuously responded: "We must brace ourselves for further school closures, cuts to staffing and increased class sizes in other regional communities."

To halt the Murwillumbah amalgamation and similar mergers, a political struggle must be developed against the corporate elite, its parliamentary servants and the teachers' unions. What is required is a new socialist perspective, which 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, parents, teachers and students need to form rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions and all the official political parties. Moreover, they need to join up with other schools facing closure across the country, and with rank-and-file educators' committees globally, that are fighting similar attacks on public education.

To take forward this fight, contact the Committee for Public Education below:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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