

Australia: Shepparton teacher speaks of lack of health and psychological resources in schools

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The Committee for Public Education recently spoke to a Shepparton teacher discussing the complex problems and ongoing crisis confronting teachers and students with the imposition of a super-school, the first of a four-stage Education Plan initiated by the state Labor government, in the regional city of Victoria.

Stage one involves the amalgamation of four secondary schools into one super-school enrolling up to more than two-and-a-half thousand students. The amalgamation has led to an array of serious problems involving the elimination of special needs and student well-being programs, violent physical conflicts between students and experienced teachers leaving the profession while many other educators have been compelled to take stress leave.

In the last two weeks reports have emerged in the media of students physically assaulting teachers, after staff meeting minutes were leaked to the local press. The school principal Barbara O'Brien has claimed the reports of teachers being punched are not true, describing the incidents as "accidents" and stating that talk of threatened teacher walk-outs was "baseless information."

The state branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU) has been complicit with the education plan from the beginning as a member of the advisory board, gagging teachers and discouraging any teacher action.

The Shepparton teacher, who wishes to remain anonymous, explained the extraordinarily difficult situation teachers confront amid deepening community and student disadvantage, and the lack of much needed support services to deal with the crisis (see: "Australian state government Shepparton Education Plan documents detail social crisis").

The teacher stated: "A lot of the problems we are having with kids, these are medical issues, they are not teaching and learning issues. These kids need serious psychological intervention, behavioural therapists and programs focused on that.

"We are not at the point with some kids that you can reason with them. They are not willing to accept a mainstream teaching and learning program. The education department continues to ignore the evidence presented to it.

"It is now time for more health professionals to be involved. It is not a question of student engagement. These are kids that have severely traumatized backgrounds. A lot of kids come from homes where drug and alcohol dependency are rife. They are the third and fourth generation living in poverty and dependent on welfare. These are serious social issues.

"How teachers prepare lessons is not the issue. It is foolishly thought the teacher has control of these things. Kids bring so much baggage with them.

"It is impossible to get a kid with a life that is so traumatic, who is exposed to such violence all the time and all the other contemporary social issues at play, to sit still and focus for half an hour. But teachers are meant to have the magic formula.

"We are told it is world class education we have here in Shepperton, but it is not in touch with what we should be doing. Instead of spending so many millions on a super-school, why did we not establish on each site a building with medical professionals in it?

"Some of our kids would not have had a basic health check-up since they were basically immunized as a baby. These are not families that might take their kids to the doctor unless it is basically an emergency and

they need an ambulance. They are not seen by medical professionals regularly.

“Of course, we have issues with some kids on the Autism spectrum and a variety of other issues but the kids I am talking about are years away from having proper medical intervention in their primary years. A lot of the kids don’t have skills to manage themselves.

“We have some kids that freak out if they have to go into a class with 25 kids but the education minister will happily go into the public and trumpet that all the resources have been sent up to Shepparton. It is just not true. It doesn’t help us.

“I don’t have a medical degree and neither do any of my colleagues. We need serious help to manage a lot of these things. All the kids that don’t have these issues in the classes are drifting away to other schools. Those families that have a bit of disposable income are putting it into private and independent education.

“So, by not addressing the issues we are losing the kids we want to keep. That is what is exacerbating all the problems we are dealing with. We are not resourced to manage them. This is a sinking ship and it is not sinking slowly.”



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