

Australian state government Shepparton Education Plan details social crisis

Karen Maxwell
6 August 2021

The state Labor government in Victoria is proceeding with its Shepparton Education Plan—at the centre of which is a staged merger of four public secondary schools in the regional city into one “super-school”—despite enormous community opposition.

The first stage of the forced amalgamation has already resulted in catastrophic consequences for students and teachers alike. Student welfare and additional needs programs have been slashed, subject choices scaled back, and students crammed into three campuses, where previously there had been four.

Experienced teachers, dismayed by the changes, have left the school in high numbers, and violent conflicts between students have escalated to the point where ambulances and police have been forced to attend the school in response to emergencies.

The government announced the second and third parts of its Education Plan in April and June. The second part was focussed on the provision of preschool education in Shepparton, while the third stage dealt with Shepparton’s network of primary schools (for children aged 5 to 11).

Accompanying both announcements was cynical government rhetoric proclaiming the “transformational” nature of these policies, which supposedly are going to ensure that “children in Shepparton will get the best possible start in life.”

In reality, the government’s measures will plunge the public education system in the regional city into an even worse crisis.

Already there has been an exodus of students into private schools. This is set to further accelerate, following last month’s announcement of a new private combined primary-secondary school, run by the Anglican Schools Commission (ASC), a provider of religious private education. The ASC is receiving

federal and state public funding to develop the \$50 million project.

By undermining confidence in the public education system, the state Labor government is driving the privatisation of public education, as families who can afford tuition fees seek to escape the chaos of the “super-school.” For the most socially disadvantaged layers in Shepparton, however, there is no choice other than under-resourced public schools.

Government documents on stages two and three of the Education Plan included statistics on the shocking levels of poverty and hardship affecting working class families in the area.

The stage two document explained: “For decades, the young children of Greater Shepparton have experienced some of the lowest educational and health and wellbeing outcomes, and the highest levels of social disadvantage in Victoria.... Nearly 70 percent of local children spend their early years living in the greatest social disadvantage—triple the state average.”

The document added that by the time Shepparton children begin school, they:

- are twice as vulnerable in “critical development domains” than the Victorian average,
- have double the risk of developing behavioural and emotional problems than their state-wide counterparts,
- are twice as likely to have experienced stress in their family home, such as parental alcohol or drug problems, child abuse or to have witnessed violence, compared to the whole of Victoria.

Having pointed to certain aspects of the social crisis, the government’s plans include not a single proposal to address the extreme deprivation and social disadvantage suffered by so many children and their families in Shepparton.

Instead a series of limited measures are proposed,

purportedly improving school services and early childhood education and caregiving. Stage two of the government's Shepparton Education Plan, focussed on the provision of pre-school services for children, promotes the recent opening of an Integrated Early Learning Centre (IELC) in Mooroopna. It will cater for 60 to 100 preschool children, staffed with a maternal health nurse, paediatrician and play therapist.

This is a drop in the ocean, compared with what is required. Mooroopna is one of the areas in greater Shepparton most blighted by poverty, and has a significant indigenous population as well as refugee families who have fled the trauma of war.

There are no immediate plans to build any other such learning centres. Instead, the Stage two policy document blandly states: "It is envisaged that the IELC at Mooroopna will serve as an effective model that could be reflected in future years across Greater Shepparton."

The state government established the Mooroopna IELC in partnership with the Colman Foundation, a philanthropic organisation that is already involved in a number of other projects with the Victorian Department of Education.

The government has opened the door for private charities to operate within the public education system, a profoundly regressive move. A high-quality, free public education ought to be a social right, with every child also having access to publicly-funded and provided medical and social services. Instead, however, the government is abdicating its responsibility to working class children in Shepparton and throughout the state, moving to make the provision of decent facilities and resources dependent on the activities of private philanthropists.

Mooroopna Park Primary school initiated a Healthy Eating Program in 2019, and now provides breakfast and lunch for all students, after it was found that 80 percent of children were coming to school either with no food or very unhealthy food. The program depends on the collaboration of community organisations that are reliant on donations from local businesses and the service of volunteers.

School principal Hayden Beaton told "The Educator Online" that during the COVID lockdown and remote learning, "it became clear to teachers that many students lacked even a pencil and paper at home."

In the face of this grotesque social inequality, the third stage of the Shepparton Education Plan that focuses on primary schooling offers nothing but a continuation of the same government policies being imposed across all public schools in Victoria.

This policy is known as FISO (Framework for Improving Student Outcomes), introduced by the Victorian state Labour government in 2015. It is a data driven model for education based on "continuous improvement" through the evaluation of teaching performance against key targets and indicators, including NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) standardised test results.

The Shepparton Education Plan document suggests that primary schools' academic levels can be lifted by strengthening the implementation of "the FISO improvement cycle to pursue innovation and best practice."

In other words, the government's plan is to maintain and promote the very policies that have led to the current situation. As if students can be engaged in lessons, no matter how well planned and delivered, when they are hungry or when they come from homes where violence, drug abuse and homelessness are rampant (see: "Shepparton teacher speaks of lack of health and psychological resources in schools").

The state government's deliberate neglect of public schools in Shepparton, and its contempt for the social needs of working families, underscores the right-wing, pro-business nature of the Labor Party. To achieve a properly resourced public education system and an end to poverty and social deprivation, workers need to break with Labor and build a new party based on a socialist and internationalist program aimed at meeting social need, not private profit.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact