

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Shepparton – Wednesday 17 April 2024

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WITNESSES

Jenny Houlihan, and

Lindsay Dann.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee public inquiry for state education in Victoria. Joining us this afternoon is Jenny Houlihan and Lindsay Dann from the Greater Shepparton council.

Lindsay DANN: She was a councillor. I was a teacher a long time ago.

The CHAIR: Okay, thank you. Thank you very much for coming in today. Before I continue I just want to introduce our committee. I am Trung Luu, Chair of the committee. The Deputy Chair is Ryan Batchelor. This is Ms Melina Bath, Ms Moira Deeming, Mr Aiv Puglielli and Dr Renee Heath.

Thank you so much for coming in. I just want to quickly read this information to you: all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any actions for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

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Thank you so much for coming in today. I know we are running a bit behind time, but thank you for staying behind. Could you please state your name and your organisation.

Jenny HOULIHAN: Jenny Houlihan, a member of the Greater Shepparton family – community.

Lindsay DANN: Lindsay Dann, a former teacher. I taught in Cobram, Kerang and for 22 years here in Shepparton. I am a passionate public school person whose bum is dragging on the ground with what has happened to our community's education and particularly rural and regional education – just disappointment for our families, our students and our teachers.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. We much appreciate your insights. I will open up for any opening statements you want to make before I ask the panel of the committee for their questions.

Jenny HOULIHAN: Yes, thank you very much. I very much appreciate that you have established a committee on education, because it is something we need to be always looking at – always looking at how we can do it better and always looking at maybe some problems that have cropped up – because across the state and across all communities one size does not fit all, as we have found in Greater Shepparton, which I will come to in a minute.

I was a public school teacher for many years in primary and secondary, mainly around here but also in Echuca and Cohuna, a long time ago now, but the experiences always stay with you. I also have children. I am like Lindsay – I am very keen to see that we offer our communities, wherever they are, a quality public education, not just a building and a school but an actual option that says, 'I would love to have my children stay in public education,' and that they can have an option to go private if they want to but never make a decision where they feel they cannot go to access the local primary schools or secondary schools or whatever that might be. My children have all gone through public schooling. My grandchildren have all gone through public schooling.

I was also a councillor on Greater Shepparton City Council for 11 years. During those 11 years I was mayor. With those positions you get to know a lot about your community that you may not otherwise know. The reason that I am here today is really because I think I have a view of what would work and what does not work in this particular community. I am not speaking for any other community. The government have a *Shepparton Education Plan*, which they have been implementing over several years. In my opinion most of it is valuable and is going well.

I think we are well served with primary schools here and we are well served with kindergartens, and we are actually getting another kindergarten soon. Unfortunately, we are a little worried because it is going to be out on the highway, which is our main bypass at the moment, and all the trucks are there. It is on the opposite side to the houses, and we already have a problem there with safety because the kids have to cross over all of the time or cars have to come and go. There will be more of them, so I am just popping that one in there because I think making sure the safety and the infrastructure are there at the same time as new schools and areas – Moira knows what I am talking about there. Anybody I think who has been around schools, and you know how busy they are, knows that if you have got hundreds of trucks going by and just one little lollipop person – not good. So it would be handy to have you look into that and maybe make some recommendations about safety infrastructure that should be put there, at least before the kindergarten goes there or at the same time.

Today I am only going to concentrate on what has happened with secondary education over the last five or six years in Greater Shepparton, because that part of the *Shepparton Education Plan*, I believe, has been a huge mistake. I know everybody wants it to be what looks good on paper, but I believe we have got it wrong here, and I am hoping that I can give you some information about why you should keep that in mind when you are doing the report. It is about education that is suitable for particular communities.

What happened here was the closure of four secondary schools and the replacement of those with one school – a massive school, which was built to eventually go up to 3000 – in an area which is at a very low socio-economic level. That is proven; it is funded that way through government. That is a real disadvantage – to take away the things that you should have for attracting people into education – for families and students who belong to a lower socio-economic community in general. It is different than providing something in a really rich area in, say, Melbourne. You are looking at different models. That might work in Melbourne in a rich area; it does not work in Shepparton.

Why I say it does not work: looking at the geographical situation, we have quite a large rural and town area in Greater Shepparton. It is 2400 square kilometres, so if you think about it, the only choice for public education for all of those families – and our population now is getting up towards 70,000 – in 2400 square kilometres is to go to one school in one tiny area in the industrial estate of Shepparton. That in itself has provided a lot of difficulties for a lot of families. Formerly they could ride or walk to school very, very easily, and now they can be spending up to an hour just to get to school. We do not have a very good public bus system here. We have a school bus system, but even with that kids still have to walk to a bus stop, get a town bus to the interchange, get on the interchange and then to the school. Now, as you can imagine, in an area of 2400 square kilometres, that can be quite a massive inhibition to attracting children to get to school every day and to get home again. That has been quite a difficulty.

I am going to pass over to Lindsay in a minute, because he has got some good information about the way that people have voted with their feet. I think it is fair to say that despite a whole lot of the objections from people and their parents, mainly, and teachers, who I must admit really did not have the freedom to speak out when the government actually stated that this was what was going to happen here, but we do know because we are connected. When you live in a place like Shepparton you know hundreds of people, so you know what they are saying. We know what the teachers were saying. We know the parents were marching in the streets. They were not listened to then; they have not really been listened to since. But they have voted with their feet, and we have lost hundreds from the one public secondary school in Shepparton. Now, Lindsay has quite a bit of information about that because he was involved with the numbers on grade 6 cohorts and how many were going into secondary schools. Do you want to just take that up? We really want you to get an idea of how many kids' families have actually dropped out of public education because of the change from four schools to one.

Lindsay DANN: Thank you, Jenny. As I said before, I am passionate about state school education, and we know that it is struggling across rural and regional Victoria and that something really needs to be done. I think the \$120 million, \$140 million spent in our region has effectively destroyed public education at the secondary level, and it is gut-wrenching. For example, I worked for the Better Together Alliance, which was the four secondary schools for the two years before they became the one campus, in charge of year 6 to year 7 allocations. Each year we have somewhere between 600 and 700 grade 6 kids in our feeder schools. We were getting at least 80 per cent of those kids coming into our secondary schools. Currently it would be 50 per cent or just over. We have lost that many coming out of the primary schools, and it is gut-wrenching.

It makes me think – and I am a bit cynical here: out of the goodness of their hearts the Anglicans are spending \$50 million plus to build a P-12 on Verney Road, the same road as Greater Shepparton Secondary College and the grammar school up the road, and they are not doing that out of the goodness of their hearts, I am sure, but because they probably had a look at what is happening in education in this town and they can probably have fee-paying people go there. I understand that it did not take them long to fill the classes that they offered. That is going to be competition for our system, which again annoys me because we should be able to compete if not beat the private schools, because many of my former colleagues now work in the private schools. Now, they are better teachers out there than they were in town only because of the quality of the students. I think when you look at the number of students we have lost, for a building that was put together for 2700, because there were over 2600 secondary students in our four colleges, it would currently have just over 2000. So there are 600 kids missing, and our population is going through the roof, we believe, in Greater Shepparton. It is going from 60-something thousand up to, they are predicting, 85,000 in 2036, and we are not getting those kids coming through our system. And we have put so much money into the system. There have got to be lots of problems there.

When you look at the fact that there are now only, say, 2000 students on that site, what has it done to the town economically? Well, at one teacher for every 15 kids on that site now, that technically means 140 teachers. There would have been 100 more in the two towns when we had the four campuses. Now, all those 100 have not gone into the other schools to get work. They have left the area. Some have obviously changed jobs and whatever. I remember meeting with union reps when this was first mooted, asking them if they understood what was going to happen to our secondary education system, and disappointingly, they had no idea about how many teachers we would lose. All they could say was, 'Well, the department has promised that they won't lay people off.' They did not, and that is fair enough, but through natural attrition they have disappeared.

I do not know if anyone has spoken about the huge problems we are having trying to get CRTs in this town – and it is an enormous problem. One of my university friends who became a teacher and was a principal is one of the liaison principals. He was working with a private company trying to get CRTs to come to Shepparton, and a couple of years ago he contacted me wanting to know what was going on because he was getting teachers to come up for two or three days and then they would say, 'We're not going back there.' Now, that is really concerning. We are the fifth-largest city in Victoria and we cannot get people to want to come and teach here, yet we have got enormous opportunities in health and whatever industries.

I would really like to know if anyone knows if there has been any investigation done by the department or anyone in authority about where our families have gone, because I have no doubt that if we have lost 600 out of 2700, we have not lost the bottom end of our socio-economic community; we have lost the families who can afford to go somewhere else and drive or send their kids to private schools and boarding. Now, that is of great concern for our rural and regional communities. It has also been tossed around in our media about how we get doctors to come to the town when they do not have a public school to send their kids to. My four kids all went through Gowrie Street and Wanganui here in town – and if you are not a local, they were the ghetto schools in the housing commission area – and my kids have all done pretty well. I have got six grandchildren in the town now, and I want them to have an opportunity to go to a good public school. From where I am sitting at the moment they will not get that, and that is going to be gut-wrenching.

Jenny HOULIHAN: Could I just mention about the financial side of it? We know these things because Facebook has been quite strong here on the super school and the effect on their children. Whilst some say, 'My children are doing okay there, they're quite happy,' that is good, but what we are concentrating on now I think is we have left it long enough to see that ignoring this problem any longer means we are not doing the right thing by the people of Greater Shepparton. We know now after four years that every year the attendances at our secondary college are going down. We need to stop that, but also we need to help out the people who left and who did not want to leave but had to for a range of reasons. It could have been travel, it could have been bullying, it could have been not being happy at the school – too large.

We do know through research that the best size of a school for children in the lower socio-economic range of communities is up to 900. So if you imagine some of those children going suddenly to a school that was built for 2700 with room to put another building on to make it up to 3000 – because people imagined this was better than sliced bread and having this huge great big school was going to be amazing. So I think a lot of people, us included, thought, even though you could see all the problems, 'Let's wait and see if it sorts itself out.' Every year the numbers are going down, and I think it is time now – and that is why this inquiry is really timely – to

make a statement and say, 'This is not working in Greater Shepparton. Let's stop and have a look at it.' And it is no good asking the school what it is doing, because of course like every school they have got positives to show. We have to look at what is happening. When you have got 500 or 600 children who are not now going, and that is whole families, that is a real concern, and I think we would be irresponsible if we did not stop and look at where they have gone. You are not going to get them back, but hopefully if there is another school they might go to that.

At the moment they have only got the choice of a private education, which you have to pay for. As Lindsay said, a lot of people cannot even think about doing that. If there was another secondary school, they might go to it. They might want to go to another school, but they cannot afford it. And then you have got that slightly better-off group who are struggling because they are now parting out with an extra \$5000 or \$10,000 per year to pay for their children to go to school because they want their children to go to school, because the children were refusing. That in itself puts a huge strain on our lower socio-economic families.

What else is happening, which is probably even worse, is some families found when they made the rush to enrol their children at the local Catholic school, because that would have been the cheapest, the people who had already been in the Catholic system got first priority, which is understandable. So what people have been doing is actually putting their children in the Catholic schools at the prep level; they are not waiting till they get to the secondary level. So you are losing those children and families from our public education system at that even lower level.

Before we finish today I would really like to tell you a real positive story, which is what is happening in Mooroopna. I will maybe do that towards the end, because they are really dealing with this problem very well, including their Aboriginal community, all working together. I would like to leave you with that positive story before we finish.

Lindsay DANN: I would like to just finish up on the numbers game. The promise made five or six years ago through the education department and the committee that they set up locally was that people would be queuing up to get into this new school we have got. It was all based on Dandenong. I have had a good look at Dandenong over the years to see what is so good about it. In 2007 the mergers started there – three schools, 2100 students, now 1445 students. I am sure Dandenong's population has grown a bit since 2007, so that is an enormous number to lose. Our understanding is that we were promised it would be a success because of Dandenong, and that is really disappointing. If you look at that, where have they gone? Who has gone? The average score at Wanganui five years ago, six years ago, was 29 – just under the 30 we think is not too bad. Currently at Greater Shepparton Secondary College it is 21 or 22, and that is out of 50. It is pretty damned ordinary. We have lost so many really good teachers to the private system, or they drive up to Numurkah. The numbers – we are losing from our system, and that is just so disappointing.

What about teacher health and wellbeing? I can talk from personal experience there because my wife – a teacher in this town for well over 20 years – is on WorkCover. She was broken by the system and did not have any support. She shifted from the school that she was in to one that she did not know and was not given any support. There are so many problems. The fact that the government has put so much money in is positive, but we need to make sure that is going to the right spots so that the families in our community get the benefit of it.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. It is great to start off with your experience and your knowledge of the area. I will open it to questions.

Ryan BATCHELOR: How long have we got, Chair? Sorry, I am just wondering.

The CHAIR: You have got 4 minutes each.

Melina BATH: My question is: tell us about Mooroopna. That is my question.

Jenny HOULIHAN: Well, I thought this was worth telling you about, because we have a recognition in this community that what they offer in public secondary education is not right; it is not working. Probably the worst off of all our communities is Mooroopna, because they really do have a lot of low socio-economic families there. They have got great community spirit, but they are also divided from Shepparton. To make it worse they are divided from Shepparton by a river – the Goulburn River – so it is actually difficult for them. It might not look like very much on a map, but it is actually quite difficult for the kids to get to school, because they have to

get to the interchange and then on a bus. They cannot ride to school, because even though there is a track through the bush –

Melina BATH: It is about 6 kilometres, isn't it?

Jenny HOULIHAN: Yes, and bindi-eyes in the summer really stop most people riding. You probably would not let your young children go there anyway; it is quite isolated. But once it floods, the whole town is cut off from Shepparton.

Melina BATH: Jenny, we were there for the flood inquiry; we held it at the rec reserve. So what is happening that you approve of or that you like, and what do you want to see?

Jenny HOULIHAN: Because they are so disadvantaged over and above everybody else, and the geographical side of it is one of the things that makes it even harder, they have started working as a community over there to put forward a case to actually have their school reopened. The Mooroopna high school – they were told, 'We cannot possibly have this continue because your results are so terrible, and the building is no good and we're not going to do it up for you.' Well, I would have thought that if they had \$120 million to spend in Shepparton, \$30 million for one of the four schools would have been a good start for Mooroopna, but that was not what happened; they had it closed down. Since then the Aboriginal community have noticed a lot of children have not gone to school. Before then, I would say, Mooroopna high school was one of the best located schools you could ever get, because it was surrounded by residential areas – just completely surrounded – older ones and newer ones. A lot of the kids could get to school very, very easily, but it was closed. So the community have put up with that for a few years, and, like all of us, now they are saying, 'Nup, we can't go on like this; we have to do something.' So they formed a town group. They have been going for probably about a year now, and they call it the College of Mooroopna Learning, or COOL for short. They have a doctor of education working with them to help them. They are having town meetings and they are actually putting forward proposals. I know they have been to the council to get support, and they will be putting forward to parliamentarians as well to have that school reopened in conjunction with Rumbalara. Rumbalara is the organisation for Aboriginal people. They have a lot of advanced developments under the name of Rumbalara, a fantastically positive and proactive community of Aboriginal people that we have had here for many, many years, so they are working together with this group. Rumbalara have been given a lease for something to do with other things that they do, not in education, but it is for some of the rooms. There is enough room over in Mooroopna to also establish a school – it does not matter if it is not a thousand kids, as long as it gives kids somewhere to go. But not only that, they have done work on basing their curriculum that could go into this COOL school based on the Gemmill Swamp up the road for environmental work for the primary industries. They have been to see all these people and they are all linked in.

This should be able to progress because it is a great idea. It is a community-based offering about what will work for our kids, and it will be also for Tatura and Murchison. A third of the community live over on that side of the river, so you are talking a lot of kids, and maybe it could even be that some of the children who do not suit the school here could also go over there. I would really like to offer you the opportunity to know about Mooroopna, and maybe later on we can give you the name of someone who will tell you – they are actually having a town meeting tonight.

Melina BATH: What I might suggest, Jenny, is that we are happy to put it on notice. If there is a submission that they want to make, I can ask that question, and then they can send that in. Thanks, Chair.

Jenny HOULIHAN: Right. Just one other thing – so these are from Mooroopna parents: submissions 60, 71, 72, 79.

Melina BATH: I think there were almost 20 submissions. They were only one line, often, but anyway, you have provided that and we would love to see more of that, if that is possible.

Jenny HOULIHAN: Yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We might move on, Jenny, to the next question.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Did you support the merger of the schools when it was first proposed?

Jenny HOULIHAN: I tried to be as objective as I could. I was not a councillor at the time; I was retired. But I watched very carefully and I listened. I did not really get involved or make any judgements for probably a year or so. But when you see –

Ryan BATCHELOR: Sorry, we just do not have a lot of time. What about the broader community? What was the attitude of the broader community?

Jenny HOULIHAN: I think a lot of people thought, ‘This is fantastic, a big building.’

Ryan BATCHELOR: Why did they think that?

Jenny HOULIHAN: Why do they think that?

Ryan BATCHELOR: Yes, I am trying to understand how people viewed the proposal over time.

Jenny HOULIHAN: There were a range of views. I think a lot of people thought, ‘We’ve got old schools. The government told us they’re not going to put any money into our old schools, but they’ll give us a new school, so let’s do that.’ Some people thought that was a good idea, and maybe it was going to be. I tried to stay objective and watch, but when you have got parents who within a few months marched in the streets – and they did here, they marched in the streets, you know –

Ryan BATCHELOR: What were they concerned about that early in the process?

Jenny HOULIHAN: Geographical issues, the size of the school, the cost of changing over, the fact that they loved the school that they were in. A lot of families had very close connections through the children and their parents, like with Wanganui – they loved the school. They did not care that it might have been 23 instead of 24 on their VCE results. They knew the kids wanted to go to school, and they also knew – because we had four schools – that if the child had problems at that school, you could go to the principal. Principals had an agreement that if a child did not suit that school or was having problems, they would have what is called a second-chance school, so they would then be able to swap to another school and often that worked for the children. That option is gone now; there is nothing.

Ryan BATCHELOR: You are obviously advocating for the reopening of at least one of the schools.

Jenny HOULIHAN: Oh, more than one. But I think –

Ryan BATCHELOR: More than one. How big do you think each of those schools should be?

Jenny HOULIHAN: Well, I think in this community no more than a thousand. But it would not work out like that; you would get smaller and larger.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Are there any other factors in the community that you think should influence where these schools are and how they should be composed?

Jenny HOULIHAN: Well, we have got one there now, and that is big. I know on the council plan that in the future there is one that is supposed to go out at Kialla, because a lot of the development of Shepparton is going that way, right? But where that is or whatever – we all know that having a school in a plan might mean that it may be there in 50 years, if you are lucky, or may not be there at all. So I think some serious work is needed, and I guess that is why I am trying to put a note in. I put it in capital letters – it is about time we had a targeted review of the appropriateness of what the current model is but also those sorts of arguments that you are talking about, Ryan. If we are going to have more schools, where would they be? Mooroopna have got off to a flying start, off their own bat, because they are desperate, really, to have something. If that happened in Mooroopna – the school is still there. It is closed, but it is still there – it could still be used. In Shepparton I think –

Ryan BATCHELOR: Are there any other – sorry, I am just afraid I am going to run out of time.

Jenny HOULIHAN: No, it is all right.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Are there any other issues that you think exist with the way that the school and the school community are operating at the moment?

Jenny HOULIHAN: Do you mean other schools? No, I am only talking about the secondary model that we have here.

Ryan BATCHELOR: So your concern is the model and its size and scale and the access issues –

Jenny HOULIHAN: The model.

Ryan BATCHELOR: rather than the way the school is being run or the teaching. I am just trying to figure out whether this is a lingering concern about –

Jenny HOULIHAN: No. I am not in the school, so I cannot really judge. It would be unfair of me to say about this school or that school, but I do –

Ryan BATCHELOR: Okay, so we cannot judge but we can suggest that it –

Jenny HOULIHAN: I am not here to make judgements on individual schools, yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: But you say it should –

Jenny HOULIHAN: I am saying the model of one school only for this community, of this size and of this make-up, is not suitable, and it has proven not to be suitable for enough children. If there had been 50 that were not going, it would not be a worry, but when you are talking about hundreds, the alarm bells should be ringing, and we should not be stuck with this model forever. It is just not fair.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I am done, thanks, Chair. Thank you.

Lindsay DANN: If you look at the numbers game, a quick study I have done shows 2000-plus students belong to Ballarat, Balwyn, Glen Waverley, Keysborough and McKinnon, relatively successful towns. Then we have got Greater Shepparton. We started with 2500 to 2600 – currently down to just 2000. It is really concerning where these families are going to education. I know they are driving to Numurkah and I know they are heading off for private education, and that is a real concern. I had 30 years in secondary education, and we are losing really good families out of our system to private schools or to Melbourne. That is a great concern – the really good people.

The CHAIR: Renee?

Renee HEATH: Thank you so much for your submission and for your presentation. You said, Jenny, that people were – I cannot remember the exact words you used – voting with their feet. Was this before there was the merger of the four schools?

Jenny HOULIHAN: Yes, during the planning stage, I think, just answering similarly to what I was saying to Ryan before. There was a community program of consultation. Some people say, ‘Well, we went along but we weren’t listened to. It’s not what we really wanted,’ and I think there are a lot of people in our community who have virtually given up. They have said, ‘We’ve tried everything, and nobody’s listened to us’ – and I think that is true – ‘and therefore we have to think of something else and take our kids and do something else.’ That started from the very time that these community consultations started and people realised that this was going to be a big change for their kids. When they realised that their beloved school just down the road was going to be closed and their kids would all have to travel to Shepparton to a massive school, that is when we saw, literally, marching in the streets. We had people marching to the local MP’s office. Now, that does not happen if people do not care. It only happens if people care. It started pretty much straightaway, and then really it came out on a Facebook group called Greater Shepparton Voice 4 Choice. A lot of people used that to vent their problems. Now that all has gone because people give up after a while, but what has happened is we have noticed now after giving a few years of ‘Let’s wait and see’ that the ‘Let’s wait and see’ means that the situation is actually getting worse.

Renee HEATH: So despite the, in a sense, outrage in the community, you feel like the government ignored that and pushed on and went with this plan anyway?

Jenny HOULIHAN: Absolutely. We had meetings with Minister Merlino and others. Now, I know they genuinely thought that this was going to be a really good thing for Greater Shepparton and ‘We’re going to get Greater Shepparton and their poor scores’ – whereas we know that a lot of the scores were not really poor. They might have been at a couple of schools, and maybe Mooroopna might have been lower, but the kids still went to school and often the scores that your children get reflect who they are, their families and them. The schools should be given more resources to deal with it, but they were not – some, but not enough. Go on.

Renee HEATH: I just wanted to say you said that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work –

Jenny HOULIHAN: No, not for here.

Renee HEATH: but here it feels like the government was like, ‘This is what we are going to do’ – told you what to do rather than being a representative and finding out what you wanted and building that.

Jenny HOULIHAN: Well, people were trying to say what they wanted and what was not going to work for them, but that was ignored. It was as if, ‘We know this is going to be good for Greater Shepparton – we just know it. It is going to be fantastic. Wait till you see it.’ And we waited. A lot of parents, though, were really furious. They knew it was not going to suit their kids. Some of them even said, ‘I can’t get my kid on a bus every day from over the river because he’s got ADHD or autism – he won’t go on a bus. So therefore, instead of going up the road to the school, I now have to take him all the way over, get him out of the car and take him in. It takes me an hour.’ This is a single mum: ‘It takes me an hour now and it costs me \$100 more a week for petrol because I now have to come all the way over.’ Those people, they are not stupid. They knew right from the start this was not going to be good for their kids, so it has been all the way long.

Renee HEATH: Thank you. That is my time.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Aiv?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you for coming in today to speak to us. Now, you have both, from your direct experiences with the public education system, spoken about being lovers of public education that is provided to all and particularly the impact that has for this local community. Before my time in Parliament, back in 2014 it was legislated that, for every dollar spent on public schools, private or independent schools would get 25 cents on that dollar, whether they need it or whether they do not. Now it has been raised – the competition, that issue that has been raised for the local community: families leaving the public school that you have on offer. Given your experiences and your love of public education, to each of you: how does that make you feel?

Lindsay DANN: I will fight that one. The Anglicans just built a P-12. That has only just started in the last year, and they are already queueing up to get in there. That is really concerning, because they are the people who would be coming out of our primary schools to get out there. I know former state school secondary teachers have been involved in giving advice to the Anglican Church on what our community would do. They have just stolen people, in my mind, out of our system because of the bad vibes going around about our only secondary college. That really disappoints me, because state education has a huge role to play and unfortunately in this community at the moment at the secondary level the quality of our families has just dropped off because they have gone looking elsewhere. I know so many who drive up to Numurkah. I do not know how many are heading up off to Bendigo, Ballarat or Melbourne to private schools. But the fact that our total numbers have dropped by approximately 600 when our regional population is increasing is of great concern – and the number of people I taught with for 20-something years who are now teaching at the private schools or whatever. The Anglicans have not come to town just to do the right thing by our community, I am sure, to spend 50-something million out there on the same road as the secondary college and now towards the grammar, and they are queueing up to get in out there. So it is of great concern to me that our state education system at secondary level is so much under the pump.

Jenny HOULIHAN: Could I say, I sent my children to secondary school in Shepparton. I could have afforded private, but I wanted public because I think what our public schools should do is really present a microcosm of the whole of the community, and I wanted my children to experience that. I still think that is something as a community we should have as an option. It should not just be based on money or ‘We don’t like the one public school.’ Public schools should have a positive aspect to them that says, ‘This is what we do, and this is what we do well.’ It is really concerning for me that that part of being a public school student has disappeared here, because what often happens, and research backs this up all the time, is that when you have

trouble with a school, the people that can afford it will leave. They will take their students and they will go somewhere else, and that is what is happening here. It means it creams off certain levels of people in our community so that you do not get that diversity through the student cohort of your whole public education system. None of the private schools can do that; they are more sort of compartmentalised. But our public school system should offer that to our children, and I think it used to offer that quite well here when we had four separate schools. It does not offer that now; it is getting worse. As we get less and less going there, we know that it is probably a certain strata of economic level that are leaving the school, unfortunately.

Lindsay DANN: Just in terms of the quality of our student results, an average VCE score maybe five, six or eight years back would have been in the mid to high 20s and 29 consistently for Wanganui. I understand that last year the average score was 21. Now, that is gut-wrenching for me, who is a firm believer in the state school system, in that we have got to be doing the best for our communities. And 21 – I have got a feeling the lowest in the state might have been the average 20 – that is where we are at in a large community like this. We have got so much competition with the Catholics and now the Anglicans in the private system that our good kids are disappearing or heading off to other towns.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Moira?

Moira DEEMING: Thank you so much. I am so impressed that you have both come along and given this presentation when you are not directly inside those institutions. That is just such a great example of caring for your community. I have heard about this issue across various industries and projects in terms of the lack of genuine agency for local communities when it comes to state projects. There is that centralised planning. There is the consultation, but people do not feel listened to. They feel like they are just having their time wasted, that the decisions are basically made. They feel disrespected, and they feel as though they do not have any agency or control over what happens in their local community. And then when the consequences do turn out just as they had warned they would, it is such a huge fight to get anything reversed. I mean, I do not have any solutions. I think you have just hit the nail on the head. I think it is really disgraceful that planning has been centralised in that way, because this is happening in all sorts of ways to all sorts of communities. I hope that we can get it reversed for you and we can get some attention on it, because I loved the idea of the school principals having that informal second chance thing. Isn't that beautiful?

Jenny HOULIHAN: Yes, it worked.

Moira DEEMING: Some kids really stuff up their relationships in one school and they do need a clean start, and they want it. That alone is such a great argument for having different options. Thank you for caring so much about your community, and I hope that we can help you.

Jenny HOULIHAN: Thank you, Moira.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Moira. Thank you, Jenny and Lindsay, for coming in. I have just got a few questions I want to ask quickly. People leave schools for various reasons, not just one. I think there are many factors in regard to economics, work and school that might be there. The reason why the government decided to close four schools and have one school – if something was done at the time, I am sure it was to the best advice they had at the time. We cannot change the past; we just want to see what is going on.

Jenny HOULIHAN: Exactly.

The CHAIR: Hopefully we try to give recommendations: what is good and what is bad. We recommend what can be improved and what is not working. I just want to ask in relation to those four schools previously, what were the numbers at each school?

Lindsay DANN: Well, it varied. Shepparton High School when I taught there was consistently around 1100. Wanganui was anywhere from 700 up to about a thousand, and then became the largest school. Mooroopna went from two years in a row probably 15 years back where they got to nearly 1000 – within 10 of it – and then probably finished when they closed it at 200-odd.

The CHAIR: Oh, 200?

Lindsay DANN: Yes.

The CHAIR: It got down to 200?

Lindsay DANN: Yes, just over 200 students.

The CHAIR: And the fourth school was?

Lindsay DANN: McGuire, the old tech school down the south end. Its numbers were just starting to build up when this merger happened.

The CHAIR: And what was that? What was the number then?

Lindsay DANN: They probably had, I am guessing, 500 or 600. So we had about 2600 students across the four campuses, and now we have got just over 2000.

The CHAIR: I am trying to be sure in relation to the reasons why it closed regarding the numbers then, the condition of the school and the time, whatever the advice is. Obviously there were issues with the number leaving, and I am told that many, many factors played into it. It is great to hear you actually presenting that, and that is something we can look into. Recognising the problem is a start, so having you here and noting that there were some issues. We do not know the cause of it, but that is something we can look into.

Just one more question before we wrap up: in relation to the school itself, you mentioned distance – the location of the one school that has been built compared to those other four. Is it centralised, or is it to one side of Shepparton? Where is it?

Jenny HOULIHAN: Yes, it is pretty much one side of Shepparton.

The CHAIR: Compared to the four schools originally, the one location where they built the new school, where is it situated compared to the other four schools?

Lindsay DANN: Well, the old high school where I taught up on the railway line, that is the current campus for Greater Shepparton Secondary College, and it is a small campus for the 2700 they planned it for to move to 3000. If you look at the schools that are in competition in terms of size –

The CHAIR: Sorry, regarding that location compared to the other four schools originally, was it near the one with the highest student number or the one with the lowest number?

Lindsay DANN: It used to have the greatest number, over a thousand, but when they closed it, it would be lucky to have had maybe about 300 or 400. Wanganui had the greatest population, and they would have had over a thousand, maybe 1200.

The CHAIR: Would it be possible – I am just throwing it out, not knowing the location – that by having one central school and all the other schools had smaller numbers, that it would have been too far for them to travel and they would have had to travel elsewhere?

Jenny HOULIHAN: The ones we had before were quite well spread out to service the residential communities that they were built for in the first place. It is just that they were allowed to run down over the years. Some of them were improving. McGuire had a lot of Afghani and Iraqi families living in that area. You would see them walking to school all the time. My husband knew them very well because he used to teach at the English language centre where they first would go for six months to learn English and then go to the secondary schools. They used to say – now, I do not know; it might have changed after a few years – ‘We loved going to McGuire’, because it was built, and that is what a school can do. They can build their program around the people or the area that they are servicing. I think that is what our four schools did very well. Some of these kids I know have said to him, ‘We don’t like going to school anymore, Mr Houlihan,’ because they have to go on a bus. They cannot just walk down there. They do not feel as comfortable in the smaller community, which had a lot of the other families.

Maira DEEMING: Nobody knows them. They cannot be known and know people well if it is a big school.

Jenny HOULIHAN: Yes, exactly. You lose that. I know if you asked about that issue with Greater Shepparton Secondary College, they would say, ‘Well, we have three different buildings’, or neighbourhood

houses – I think it is three – ‘and we have 900 going into each.’ They are only a few metres from each other, but that means that the kids are going to feel like they are all in a little home all to themselves, right? That is rubbish, sorry, because when they arrive at that school it is massive. That might suit them after a while.

I am not saying this school does not do some good things or does not suit some children. What I am saying is too many of our children are not compatible with that type of education – located in one area with travel issues, size issues, taking away that family connection that they often had. If you were in Mooroopna and Mum could not get you to school and you just lived nearby, Mum could go and see the teacher. Mum cannot do that now because she is a single mum and has got kids at home and she cannot get in the car and drive all the way over to Shepparton. But that would also happen somewhere else. So, yes, for lots of reasons the kids really miss their schools and what had been built for them at those schools. That seems to have been ignored. It was almost as if the government was saying, ‘Look, whatever the other schools do we can do in this one big school better.’ Well, we have come here to say, ‘No, they can’t.’ We have given it enough time to show the evidence that no, they cannot do it. They need to take stock and they need to do something about it – and you have got a positive community on the march.

The CHAIR: Did you want to finish off with some comments or some statement?

Lindsay DANN: I think we have done that.

Jenny HOULIHAN: I am happy with that, thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much for coming in and actually for your insight from a community point of view in relation to the school and what is required, and we will definitely take that on board in relation to particularly this area, looking at the decrease in the number of kids and where they are going. We are not sure where they are heading to – probably to private schools, we are not sure. I am pretty sure there would be more than one reason why kids are leaving, but we will look into that as well. Thank you so much for your time and for your submission.

Witnesses withdrew.