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Organisation:

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Submission:

PUBLIC SECONDARY EDUCATION IN GREATER SHEPPARTON

For several decades many families living in Greater Shepparton, which is an area of approximately 2,400 sq kms and which includes the city of Shepparton, the large town of Mooroopna, and 9 smaller towns within the extensive rural farming areas, had access to four available government secondary schools. They were strategically located close to residential precincts: one in south Shepparton, one in central Shepparton, one in north Shepparton and one in Mooroopna. A co-operative system existed between the four schools to ensure that if a student was not achieving at a satisfactory level or had social or behaviour issues, enrolment at one of the other government schools was an option.

At the start of 2020, despite strong community objection (particularly from parents), the four established schools ceased to exist and became the one gigantic school; Greater Shepparton Secondary College. The change from the 4 well-located neighbourhood schools which had evolved over time to suit the needs of their students into a 'one school for all' Super School model has been less than successful for many students, their families and for many teachers. For some, it has been a disaster. After nearly four years, there is adequate anecdotal and data based evidence to support that conclusion.

People have voted with their feet and as a result, enrolment numbers are not playing out as predicted. The school has 3 'neighbourhood houses' built side by side, to house 900 students in each. The government predicted that total enrolments would start at around 2,600 and then move up to 2,700 (full capacity) over the next few years as the school became established and accepted. There is even a playground area on the southern boundary which could be used for another building, to then accommodate up to 3,000 students in total if necessary. Such were the over-optimistic views of the proposed success of the Super School. In reality, the latest enrolment figures after 4 years of amalgamation, have decreased to just over 2,000 students. In addition, the reputation of the government secondary school model being implemented in Greater Shepparton continues to be infused with negativity. NOW IS

THE TIME FOR A SERIOUS AND TARGETED REVIEW OF THE APPROPRIATENESS OF THE CURRENT MODEL FOR THE COMMUNITY OF GREATER SHEPPARTON.

The following points should be taken into account.

1. Greater Shepparton is a recognised area of socio economic disadvantage. It is vital that suitable and easily accessible public education options are provided for all students and their families.
2. Due to issues such as the Super School's location, unsuitable transport, bullying problems and a large school not being suitable, some families now have no choice except to pay for their children to go to a private or religious school. Many are struggling to afford this. Some students are not attending school at all, due to no other choices being available.
3. Research shows that when students have significant disadvantages, smaller schools of between 600 and 900 students provide the most beneficial settings for education. (The 'schools within schools' model proposed as part of the GSSC Super School model seeks to provide that advantage, but research demonstrates that this is only likely to be successful if each separate 'school' is autonomous. That is not the case at GSSC.)
4. There are advantages to living within easy reach of school for many families: students can walk or cycle to school and parents are able to build closer relationships with the

school by being able to visit when necessary. Very few government secondary students across Greater Shepparton are now able to walk or cycle to school. Bus travel is inefficient , with many students spending at least two hours extra per day just getting to and from school. This wasn't the case prior to the closures.

5. Mooroopna students must cross the Causeway and the Goulburn River to get to GSSC. During recent floods, students were not able to go to school at all. Cycling through the bush on the shared pathway between Mooroopna and the GSSC is not safe for many children nor practical, especially in Summer when tyre punctures are common due to bindii growth.

6. The inquiry should note Mooroopna community's current action to restore government secondary schooling to Mooroopna. It is an impressive proposal which not only highlights their needs but also provides a positive model for future educational opportunities.

7. The current government has provided a model in Greater Shepparton which is deterring many families from using government secondary schooling and forcing them into non-government schools. Is the Victorian government seeking to provide quality public education in Greater Shepparton which is attractive to all who want and value it, or only as a default position for those who can't afford to pay fees at non-govt schools?

8. If people are considering locating their business to Greater Shepparton or applying for a job here, would they be willing to relocate their children to a place which has no other option for public secondary education except the one mega school model? Research should be carried out to ascertain the possible negative effect on the economic development of Greater Shepparton due to this factor.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry.

Jenny Houlihan (Former councillor and Mayor of Greater Shepparton)