

Time to support super school staff



SAM BIRRELL



Challenges: The staff are trying really hard to look after the kids, who are our future, Sam Birrell says.

One group that is doing it very tough in Greater Shepparton at the moment is the staff of Greater Shepparton Secondary College.

The challenges of a new merged entity coincided with a pandemic that led to a challenging first year of operation and meant students have found it difficult to settle as a result of periods of home-schooling.

This has flowed into 2021, and not just at Greater Shepparton Secondary College. There is anxiety across Victoria among school students due to the challenges of last year.

Just because the lockdowns are over, it does not mean the stress they caused will not continue to have impacts.

This is creating a very difficult environment for GSSC staff — as well as the students and parents. On top of all of that, along with some missteps from the education department in the merger transition, a report was written that apparently finds a culture of systemic racism.

I say apparently, because very few people have seen it. The leaking of the report to the ABC meant that certain elements of it have been aired in the media.

Clearly, any instance of racism from a staff member towards a

student is unacceptable. Unfortunately, media reporting of an unreleased report commissioned by the department can implicate the staff generally, when many of them are no doubt caring people who value inclusion.

They do a difficult job because they want to see young people in our community receive a quality education.

An indigenous leader made a comment to me that in our community there is outright racism, which is unacceptable and must

be acted upon, and then there is unconscious bias.

All of us can be guilty of this, and it can be overcome by cultural literacy, empathy and workplaces that support people to deal with complex and dynamic environments.

If we hurl the term 'racist' around for every perceived slight, no matter how unintended, we encourage everyone to retreat from the difficult conversations that are necessary for us to have to improve understanding of each

other. Most people don't want to say things that hurt others. A friend who came to Australia from Iraq as a teenager observed that there is a trend to put people in one of two boxes — 'racist' or 'woke', when the reality is that there is a continuum of understanding and empathy, and it is a journey.

Another colleague thinks that unconscious bias is a form of racism — just not intentional. Clearly there are different views on this. Those of us who have

never experienced any racism or bias can learn a lot from just listening.

In addition to this, the GSSC staff can feel like a bit of a political football, caught in the middle of the arguments around the single school model. The social media bullying of those who supported change has been very poor, and models bad behaviour for our young people.

This behaviour model says 'if you don't agree with someone, abuse them and their family on Facebook'. It would be good if this trend in society ended, and disagreements could be discussed respectfully.

The challenge is to create a vision of what a more inclusive Greater Shepparton looks like, and not back away from working towards it. It will involve difficult conversations, supporting each other and being prepared to listen, and sometimes people will respectfully disagree.

So how about as a community we get behind the Greater Shepparton Secondary College? The staff are trying really hard to look after the kids, who are our future.

Many of them are going above and beyond what their employment contract says because they care. The new model will require time, leadership and community support.

The move to the excellent new facilities next year will help, but so will a bit of space, understanding and support.

● Sam Birrell is chief executive of the Committee for Greater Shepparton.

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