

Lack of schooling a ticking bomb



OPINION – Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] T [/dropcap>here is a ticking bomb under south-west Victoria called a lack of education and it is set to blow up in our faces unless we start to do something about it.

For a variety of reasons that are still being nailed down, hundreds of teenagers in the south-west are dropping out of school and either doing nothing, having babies, drifting, or falling into a nasty, destructive spiral that – once they have tumbled in – is extremely hard to climb out of.

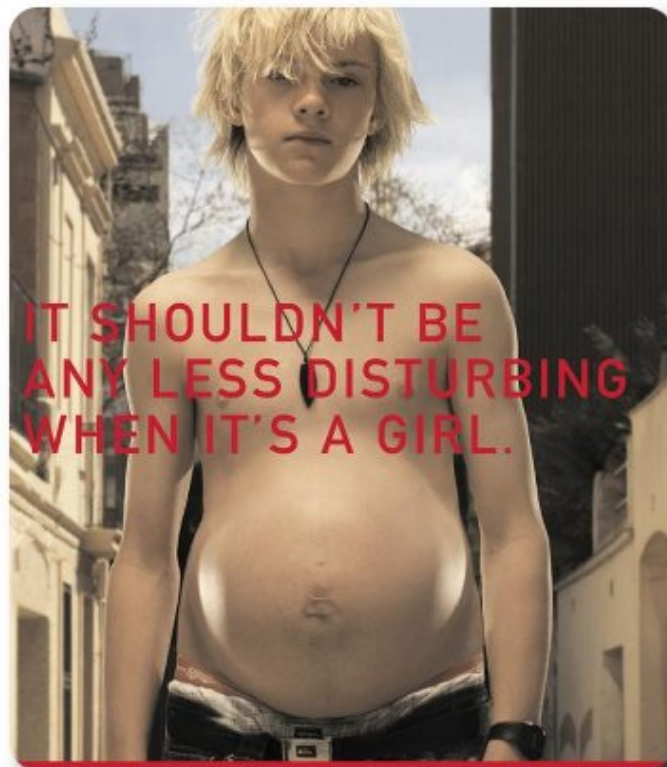
The numbers are chilling.

The six councils that make up the [Great South Coast Group](#) (stretching from Corangamite to the South Australian border and up to Hamilton) have reported that **only 57 per cent** of all school kids in our area are finishing Year 12 or its equivalent.

In some areas, such as in and around Portland and Heywood, is it a lowly **51 per cent**.

For boys, the figures are like those from a bygone era: **44 per cent** in Glenelg, **46 per cent** in Corangamite and **48 per cent** in Moyne.

As one member of the Great South Coast Group put it, we are teetering “on third world standards”.



Teenage pregnancy is among the issues facing the south-west community that are connected to school drop out rates. Image: onemilwaukee.org

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] T [[/dropcap]hese dreadful figures come amid news that youth unemployment among 15-19 years olds [is at its highest level in Victoria since 1997](#), with 20 per cent of kids in this age bracket having absolutely nothing to do when they get up every day.

In short, we are failing the next generation by selling them the great lie that if they don't finish secondary school, they can still have a good future.

They won't, because the sort of jobs that we might have picked up with a Year 9 or Year 10 education are going or gone.

Thousands will be left out and condemned to an under-class that struggles financially, emotionally and socially for their entire lives.

And if *they* fall behind, south-west Victoria will fall behind and become a welfare-basket backwater that can no longer cut it on a national, let alone international scale.

If this all sounds grim, it is because it is and it is happening right before our eyes and we, as a community, are contributing to the problem unless we help to fix it.



Jobs that once filled the gaps are now going or gone. (Fletcher Jones factory floor, Warrnambool. Image: Ralph Illidge, via David Owen, Save the Silver Ball and Fletchers

Gardens.)

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] T [/dropcap]he Great South Coast Group [set up a working party](#) which has spent almost three years trying to get their heads around the enormity of the problem and what to do about it.

At times, one member said, it felt like an almost overwhelming task and no wonder, because in order to *really* make a change, *everything* has to change.

After months of research, thinking and talking, the working group has come up with a broad-scale plan that challenges us to do things differently and to step away from our old ways of thinking.

Take, for example, the thinking that “the government” will step in and fix it. We have tried that, and it is not working.

What has happened, instead, is that multiple government departments are all tackling the same problem, in their own ways, without talking to each other, without being *allowed* to talk to each other and some kids end up with 12 separate case workers and no long-term solution.

(There is a great anecdote from a homelessness program in Woollomooloo, Sydney, where 52 “service providers” were all helping the homeless without knowing how many homeless they were helping. It turns out there were 90 people sleeping rough and this turned the issue on its head to become the [“90 homes for 90 lives”](#) project.)



While sporting prowess is highly valued in our community, academic ability attracts far less comment.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] T [/dropcap]ake, as another example, our thinking that the problem starts in early primary school, when kids learn to read and write and do sums.

Wrong. The working party argues that it begins at conception.

The minute that little sperm penetrates that egg, a whole suitcase of potential – or lack of – flips open for that child: is the mother an addict? Is the father? Are they comfortably well-off or poor? Literate or illiterate? Supported or isolated?

And what about the community mindset that worships all forms of sporting prowess, especially football, above academic ability?

This needs to change too.

The working party has based its approach on what is called a [Collective Impact model](#) – snappy title, right? – but it is exciting and has worked very successfully in places like

Sweden, Canada and the US, but is only now catching on in Australia.

In a nutshell, it involves motivating the community as a whole – politicians, parents, teachers, employers, philanthropists, business owners, the elderly, service clubs, sporting clubs, *you* and *me* – to work for real change.

Instead of operating in our own little corners, or doing nothing at all, we are urged to work collaboratively and collectively. “That is not my area,” or “that is not my problem,” won’t be part of the language.



[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] T [/dropcap>he first step, and it is happening as we speak, is the Great South Coast Group setting out a community action plan for each council area, because each has its own challenges.

Beautiful little Mortlake, for example, is doing its best not to become a welfare ghetto in the face of low-cost housing, poor services, poor public transport and the sheer boredom of those who have been located there by “the system”.

The action groups aim to get people talking about the problem – like we are now – and set down steps for change that we can *all* be involved in, even if it is something as simple

as listening to a child read.

It will take years to turn around a mind-set that has been years in the making, but I think this is the best approach I have seen in a long time and I can't wait to see it unfold.

Are we all prepared to help?

[box] The Great South Coast working party members include: Helen Bayne (South West PCP), Helen Durant (Great South Coast Early Years Network), Karen Foster (Great South Coast), Toni Jenkins (South-West LLEN), Marcus McCormick (South-West LLEN), Vicky Mason (W'bool City Council), Anne Murphy (Glenelg & Southern Grampians LLEN), Mary Pendergast (Dept of Education and Early Childhood Development) and Kaye Schofield (RMIT Hamilton). You can [read more about the project here](#).[/box]

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Funky bar brings life back to dead alley



The genius behind Coffin Sally's pizza and bar in Port Fairy is the combined talents of Trent Eggington and Peter Charlton.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] I [/dropcap]t was fog-breath freezing and pouring with rain when *Bluestone* first discovered **Coffin Sally's** bar which, theoretically, should have been as dead as a doornail, given the weather.

Instead this little slice of Fitzroy in Port Fairy was packed with people warming themselves by a roaring fire in an old bluestone fireplace that was built for just such nights, while owners **Peter Charlton** and **Trent Eggington** and their fleet-footed staff kept the wine flowing and the pizza coming.

It was like stepping into a party to which everyone was invited and everyone was relaxed, not least of all Peter and Trent who, in their own words, are living the dream.

The pair became friends about seven years ago after working together in pizza shops in Lorne, and – like most of us who work for others – dreamt of some day owning their own business that, in their case, would centre around a gourmet pizza bar.

Peter, who grew up in NSW, is a chef and Trent, from Melbourne, has three years' training as an architect which has given him a keen eye for what works with interior design. Aside from an appreciation for good food and aesthetics, however, the pair also share a passion for surfing.

“We spent about two years looking for the right place, the right building, that was also by the beach,” Peter explains.



Trent's background in training as an architect has

created a space that is as quirky as it is warm and inviting.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] T [/dropcap]he pair originally headed east from Lorne, investigating shops around the Port Artlington area, before deciding to check out Port Fairy and finding not only fantastic surf, but the perfect, vacant building – although it didn't look perfect at the time.

"When we first saw this place, the walls in the whole back area were covered right up to the roof," Peter says of the thick bluestone walls that date back to the 1840s.

Peter and Trent took the plunge and started their gourmet pizza business at the front of the shop in 2012 which – with its retro interior, cool music and chilled, expert staff (some hail from Cookie and The Toff, in Melbourne) – set the tone for what was to come.

"It is the first time we have ever done anything like this, so we are still learning, but there has been a slow evolution and things have just grown and unfolded organically," Trent explains.

After developing a loyal following through their pizzas, Trent and Peter expanded by renovating the middle of the building to create a cosy bar that serves boutique beers and interesting wines and added a separate dining room at the rear that, through clever design, looks like it has been there forever.

"I love old things," Trent says of his interior design work that features exposed beams, candles piled with dripping wax and blanched animal skulls.

"I love wood and stone and earthy, recycled materials and because we didn't have much money, we have worked with what was here," he says.

What was there included the idea for a business name, with the

back alley behind the shop known as Coffin Alley because it originally led to an undertakers. The boys simply added an 's'.



Surfing and small business come together for Trent and Peter who spent two years looking for the right location before deciding on Port Fairy.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] T [/dropcap]he bar opened in winter last year and, like the pizza shop before it, has become extraordinarily successful without one ounce of advertising, but simply word of mouth.

And the pair isn't finished yet. As part of their organic growth, they hope to eventually expand their kitchen and their menu while sticking to their philosophy of using only good quality produce.

"I think if you don't get too caught up in making money and just enjoy it, that is how we have taken each step so far," Peter says.

Besides, there is also surfing to be done.

Despite it being barely 10 degrees, Trent tells me that he, and his kelpie Anchovy, will be heading to the beach straight after our interview.

“It’s a pretty good life,” he laughs.



Candles burn well into the night
in the back bar...

[box type="bio"] **Coffin Sally is at 33 Sackville St, Port Fairy. Winter opening times are Wed-Sunday. Ph: (03) 5568 2618[/box]**

Whimsical art to capture the heart



Falling Knowledge (featuring the book, 'George Eliot' by Robert Speight): one of the works by Jenny Laidlaw in her exhibition at Port Fairy.

A exhibition of whimsical sculptures by artist and illustrator **Jenny Laidlaw** is in its final days at Blarney Books and Art, Port Fairy, with a talk by the artist herself this weekend (May 25).

Jenny, who lives in Jan Juc, on the Great Ocean Road, creates beautiful, eye-catching works by manipulating the pages of a humble book and then adding Prosculpt human figures to each piece.

As Jenny says in her promotional material for the work, “the

figures sit atop their literary throne, creating a vessel for emotion, message and imagination”.

The “Pages, Pen and Paint” exhibition also features Jenny’s highly detailed and colourful illustrations that, once again, capture the world of fantasy and imagination through pen, ink and watercolours.

Jenny will speak about her work at a free event next Sunday (May 25) at 3pm at Blarney Books and Art, 37 James St, Port Fairy. You can also find out more about Jenny’s work on her [website here](#).



‘Release’ (featuring ‘Walden, or Life in the Woods’ by Henry David Thoreau) which also features in the ‘Pages, Pen and Paint’ exhibition.

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CLOSED MARCH 23 – winner Louise Parlour

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[/dropcap]e love to reward our [Bluestone Club members](#) (our wonderful paid subscribers) for supporting our online magazine and helping us to produce a quality read each week.

Already we have given away a number of great prizes and this week we are offering one paid subscriber **two breakfast/lunch vouchers (valued at \$28)** from [The Farmer's Wife Harvest Cafe, Port Fairy](#) thanks to owner, Jo O'Keefe.

All you need to do to be in the draw is be a paid subscriber – ([that's easy, just click here](#)) – and you will be automatically in the running.

We will draw the winner at random next Wednesday March 26 and announce the winner on our [Facebook page](#) that night (and contact you!).

Keep your eye peeled under the "Win" tab for more great competitions that are open to all of our Bluestone Club members.

Winner: Louise Parlour.