

Love birds flock to Portland gannet colony

Gawking at gannets at Portland.

Sucking the wind right out of Portland's sails

Opinion: What is the long-term future of Portland?

Just the kit for Portland culture

Simon Greening, together with brother Jason, has added a little urban culture to Portland with a new venture based on very cool comics and cartoons...

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.

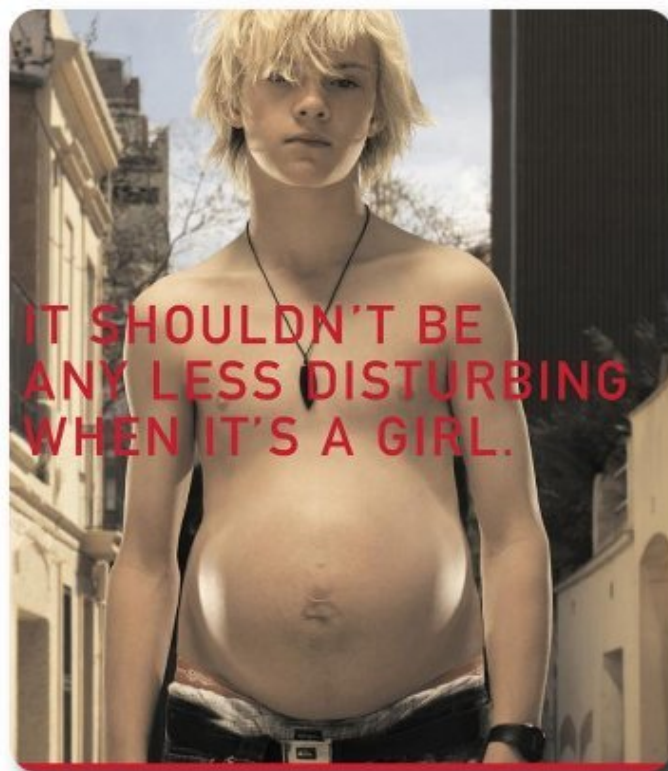
The numbers are chilling.

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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Reviving classic Australian furniture by hand



Take a seat: Meg Jarrett and partner Jack van Roo are the creative force behind Be Seated, in Portland, where they revive classic mid-century Australian furniture.

[box]A warning: by the end of this story, you will probably remember all of the stunning Australian-made furniture that you either threw away, saw poking out of a skip, or gave to a flatmate in the 1980s, and may end up in tears.[/box]

[dropcap style="color: #dc943c;"] D [dropcap]espite working all day surrounded by chairs, stools and couches in various

states of repair and disrepair, **Jack van Roo** and partner **Meg Jarrett** rarely have time to put their feet up.

Since opening their two-person business – Be Seated – early last year, the pair has been tapping into the huge demand for original, mid-century Australian furniture (1950s and 60s) that has been restored to its beautiful, retro glory.

Names like [Fred Lowen](#) (Tessa and Fler brands), Grant and Mary [Featherston](#), [Fred Ward](#) and [Clement Meadmore](#) have become the ultimate in collectable cool – not to mention quality – and their original furniture pieces have become hotly sought after both nationally and internationally.

It seems more than a little odd, then, to find Jack and Meg operating not from a high-profile shop in inner-suburban Melbourne, where they used to live, but a shed in the Portland industrial estate, half way between the port and the aluminium smelter.

“It started with our own house,” is how Jack explains it.

“We bought Meg’s grandparents house about 10 years ago, supposedly for holidays, and we decided we liked it so much that we would move into it,” he says.



It began with a house: the Tag Walter's designed 1960s house that Meg's grandmother owned in Portland and which she and Jack moved into 10 years ago.

[dropcap style="color: #dc943c;"] T he Portland house is a 1960s original designed by legendary Warrnambool architect **"Tag" (William) Walter** with the long clean lines, large windows and open fireplaces surrounded by stone that became his hallmark.

Jack and Meg couldn't help but slowly fill the place with furniture from the era and so began their love affair with mid-century design and designers.

It wasn't until early last year, however, that they combined their skills to open a furniture restoration business that can cater for all eras, but specialises in mid-century pieces.

"There is nothing made of timber, in my view, that can't be

fixed,” says Jack, who has spent most of his life working in and around the furnishing and upholstery industry.

“We had one lady who brought a chair in and an arm dropped off in transit, so we replaced the arm and it was impossible to tell the original from the replacement,” he says by way of example.

Meg has a background in interior design and fashion retail and uses her skills and contacts to source and select top quality, natural fabrics from around Australia to use for re-covering.

Between them, they have created a slice of *Mad Men* heaven, with a shed full of classic pieces that have been either found in their travels, or brought in by others to be reupholstered, re-stitched, re-stained, or whatever other painstaking method is required to bring it back to life.



Jack with a work in progress – an early colonial chair – which, like with all of his work, is painstakingly restored by hand.

[dropcap style="color: #dc943c;"] T[/dropcap]heir clients,

similarly, come from far and wide, and include some of Melbourne's top architecture and design academics, but also local graziers.

"We have seen some very, very tired furniture that has been dragged out of the shearing shed or wherever and brought in here, sometimes literally in pieces," Meg says.

"And it is not just about how much a piece might be worth, but how much people love it. If they love it, they want to see it brought back to life."

All of Jack and Meg's work is done by hand – they don't use acid dips or harsh machinery to take short-cuts – and one piece can take many, many hours to complete.

"It can be very dirty and it is very time consuming, but it is also incredibly rewarding," Meg says.



Meg comes from a background in interior design during which she developed a knowledge and love of quality fabrics.



A pile of ugly wooden school chairs – destined for the tip – have been given a new splash of colourful life.

[dropcap style="color: #dc943c;"] J[/dropcap]ack has handled hundreds of pieces of furniture, but admires the simplicity of the classic Australian designs – Clement Meadmore and Featherston are among his favourites.

Unfortunately to own an original, pristine Featherston lounge suite could cost around \$20,000 compared to several hundred pounds when they were first sold.

Perhaps Jack and Meg might stumble across a wad of cash hidden in the springs of a secondhand chair picked up at an auction?

“I’ve never come across anything like that so far,” Jack says with a laugh.

“The best I can offer are two rings that look like they come from a member of a bkie gang.”

[box type="bio"] **Be Seated is at 22 George St, Portland. Ph: Meg 0419 579 896. Follow them on [Facebook here](#).** [/box]