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KEEP YOUR EYES PEELED FOR ORANGE DAY

ECHUCA-MOAMA turns orange today. A symbol for inclusion. Wear Orange Day will see all Echuca-Moama and Leitchville schools and more than 110 businesses turn orange for the day in an effort to value all walks of life and abilities and embrace

inclusion for all. All funds raised will go towards the One & All Inclusion Project. The event was launched at Campaspe Shire's Tongala depot (pictured) earlier this week. You can read more about orange day on page 7. PHOTO: Bel Anderson, Campaspe Shire



Win

STATE OF ORIGIN
DOUBLE PASS &
ACCOMMODATION

GAME 1, JUNE 6
@ THE MCG
COUPON ON PAGE 2

EDUCATION WEEK 2018

Celebrating the arts
20-26 MAY
#EDWEEKVIC

STARTS PAGE 17

“ We’re not talking about school programs. We are talking about keeping students healthy enough to stay alive

OUR BETRAYED SCHOOL FIGHTS ON



SPECIAL REPORTS, PAGES 3, 14, 15

Fix the school or hang your head in shame

STUDENTS at Echuca Specialist School wear a smile from ear to ear.

They're happy to be there, happy to be learning, happy to be with their friends and teachers.

But behind closed doors, in interviews with journalists, phone calls to politicians or in Victoria's Parliament, the school council and staff have not been smiling for years.

They have been backed so far up against the wall they have nowhere to turn.

And that is because their school did not receive funding in the latest Victorian budget to relocate to the Twin Rivers School complex.

It is an appalling set of circumstances; so bad the school council and parents would willingly drop to their knees to beg – if they thought for even a fleeting second this government cared.

We are beyond desperate and we are

most certainly beyond looking foolish for begging. There is simply nothing else this school and our community can do.

So I write to you Mr Merlino. As Education Minister you know full well we need you to fund this school.

And we needed you to fund it yesterday.

You can spin it with political doublespeak any way you like, but your government has turned its back on a school whose students are amongst the most vulnerable and needy in the wider education system.

When a principal has to shovel raw sewage from his school something has to change.

When this sewage is seeping through sinks used to clean feeding tubes or flooding the administration building, something has to change.

When there are signs on school buildings saying 'This building

contains asbestos' something has to change.

And when a pipe bursts and there's no water to clean tubes to feed students through their stomachs, guess what?

Something has to change.

That something should have changed yesterday. But these words are not meant to pick a fight, Minister, these words are meant to encourage immediate change.

If Echuca's Specialist School was in Melbourne the outcry would have been overwhelming and, we have no doubt, action would have been immediate.

Surely the writing is on the wall.

If you don't make drastic change, and make it now, there could be dire consequences.

Last week you vowed to finish what you started and you vowed to address

immediate issues at the school.

But you've done neither.

So I am writing to you and I will plead, happily beg, on behalf of the families and staff at Echuca Specialist School, if you will do something about this school before it is too late.

A teacher's aide told me we are no longer talking about school programs any more, and she is right.

These are lives Minister, lives that are in your hands.

What are you going to do about it?

This is no longer a request. It is a demand.

Come to the Echuca Specialist School, walk through the asbestos buildings, roll up your sleeves and help the principal shovel some shit, explain to the teachers why the school had no water on Wednesday, why its unit to burn nappies is broken.

And finally, tell the students why

they can't move into a school they were supposed to be included in.

Included. Mark that word Mr Merlino. The irony of it all is in the twin towns today is Wear Orange Day, which encourages inclusion in our community.

Every school here is on board; plus more than 110 businesses.

But are you Minister?

Because our Specialist School, in its woefully inadequate portables and failing infrastructure, lurches from day to day – alone – at its High St address. It is not included in the Twin Rivers School.

And that falls on your shoulders.

You have not embraced our special community. You must step up or hang your head in shame – and resign.

■ A *Riverine Herald* special report on the school, including interviews with families and staff, starts on page 14.

AUTHORITY BOSS AND EDUCATION MINISTER RESPOND

'Governments can only fund so much'

THE Victorian School Building Authority boss has defended the government's decision to not fund the Echuca Specialist School in the state budget.

Authority chief executive Chris Keating said the school was in poor condition and a "priority" for the government.

"I understand the specialist school and the broader community are really devastated the specialist school hasn't had the funding in this budget," he said.

"I suppose from a broader perspective whilst this was a very big investment in the state budget ... there are a number of schools that are very disappointed and feel that they missed out.

"Echuca is clearly one of those." Mr Keating said it was a high priority but the project needed funding.

"I also know the (Education) Minister (James Merlino) is committed to it, he said in Parliament that his government will see this through," he said.

Mr Keating said a plumber was at the school yesterday completing a "detailed assessment" of the sewerage system.

"I know the school has raised

'This was a very big investment in the state budget ... there are a number of schools that are very disappointed and feel that they missed out'

concern about the effluent treatment, particularly the waste water and sewerage," he said.

"We spoke to the (school) principal on Friday to understand what was going on and since then we've also spoke to Vivid (formerly known as Murray Human Services) to really understand what's going on with the system.

"A plumber was out there today (yesterday) and is going to provide a detailed assessment of what the problem is.

"Once we understand what the problem is the department will fix the problem with the sewerage."

Mr Keating said one of the school's problem was when the school was opened, it only had about 10 students and now could not cope with the demand.

"Clearly the best solution for the school is to get the project funded and relocated onto the new premises but in

the meantime making sure it is an appropriate environment for the kids and staff," he said.

"The department knows this is a high priority, we know this needs to get done.

"We acknowledge the long-term solution is getting this great project developed ... we understand the community is disappointed ... whether one school's need is higher than the other is where it gets hard.

"Is it fair? At some point governments can only fund so much."

When asked whether he would be willing to come to the school to see the conditions in person, Mr Keating said he would.

"I was there in about 2010 ... I would be happy to go out again," he said.

"In any given budget not every school will get funded and unfortunately this one missed out but it doesn't make it any less of a priority."

James Merlino: 'But as I have said, we will finish what we started'



James Merlino.

EDUCATION Minister James Merlino said he would consider "future funding as part of the usual budget process" for the Echuca Specialist School.

"We will continue to work with Echuca Specialist School ... But as I have said, we will finish what we started," he said.

"I have also instructed the Victorian School Building Authority to immediately work with and support the school on their current maintenance issues."

Mr Merlino said his government was left with a "huge backlog of

'I have instructed the building authority to immediately work with and support the school on their current maintenance issues'

school investment following record low funding from the Coalition".

"Already across Campaspe Shire we have invested more than \$18 million on building and upgrading schools compared to a mere \$600,000 under the Coalition," he said.

"Relocating Echuca Specialist School is part of the Victorian Government's vision for the Echuca Regeneration Project.

"The Andrews Labor Government invested \$11 million for the new Echuca Twin Rivers Primary School.

"The school opened at the start of this year as part of the project's first stage, completing a merge between Echuca South Primary School and Echuca West Primary School."



Big



Bigger

New Grand Big Mac®



SPECIALIST SCHOOL PAYS THE PRICE OF BUDGET SNUB

Latter day tragedy being played out

High St HQ site can't deliver all these kids' must haves

BEN O'Dea reaches over to tickle his father.

The Echuca Specialist School student has been asked to pose for a photo with his dad, David.

Naturally, the 11-year-old student is over the moon about the opportunity.

Ben loves his dad and wants to make him laugh.

And it works — together, father and son, throw their head back in fits of joy.

Ben has what he wanted. He is having a ball with his dad, just like they always do.

"He's a very social little person," Mr O'Dea said.

"He's really blossomed since having his feeding tube out. He used to get sick all the time but he's just a joy to be with now."

For Mr O'Dea, and every other parent at ESS, it is a tragic set of circumstances that his son — or any of the children — cannot thrive in facilities they desperately deserve.

Instead, Ben has to remain at the Echuca Specialist School's current location on 238 High St because the school missed out on funding to move into Twin Rivers.

It's enough to turn Mr O'Dea's smile upside down.

Until, at least, his son can get what he deserves.

And that's an education in a safe and hygienic facility — a world away from where is now.

"Back then we thought Ben would be in the new school by grade four and he is a grade six now," Mr O'Dea said.

"The first time we genuinely expected the money (\$11 million) would come was last year.

"Originally the schools were going to be combined then it was changed to



SMILE: Echuca Specialist School student Ben O'Dea successfully made his father, David, not just smile for the camera but have a good laugh.

a stage one and stage two process and we were going to be part of stage two.

"The stage two money was supposed to come through last year and for whatever reason it didn't.

"It was disappointing then but for that to happen again this year, it's just a disgrace.

"Some of the schools who have got this funding are embarrassed and don't know what to do with it."

Mr O'Dea lives in Moama and has been associated with the school since Ben, who has Down syndrome, started in 2012.

"When he started school he had esophageal atresia ... which meant he had a feeding tube until he was seven or eight," he said.

"As a parent when your kid is starting at a special school it's a fairly daunting prospect. It was suggested I

get involved in the school council and I decided to do that because I thought it was a way for me to be involved.

"It is an amazing school community. Given the circumstances the staff and aides works in they are just outstanding.

"They go above and beyond what you would do in a normal job."

Ben was five when he started school and loves it.

"I think he is just starting to get the idea now that when he gets a day off school it's a special day and he is happy about it," he said.

"For most of his school life he's been disappointed on a Saturday when he doesn't get to go."

Mr O'Dea, who is the school council's vice president, said the school needed to move into new facilities.

"What's happened with the present government is a disgrace," he said.

"Our local member (Peter Walsh), who is obviously the other side of politics, mentioned it in question time last week which is terrific but I would like to see it made much more public and more of an issue state wide.

"The present government won't care how disgusting we think it is because they don't have a candidate in this area.

"We want the school funded. At the very least we want our local member to come out and say quite publicly 'If we're elected we will fund it'.

"It's a political reality that if your local member is not in government you tend to miss out.

"If you're going to use special needs children as a political football

‘He’s really blossomed since having his feeding tube out. He used to get sick all the time but he’s just a joy to be with now’

that just goes beyond what anyone would think is reasonable."

Member for Murray Plains Peter Walsh says he is "absolutely committed" to providing a modern learning environment for Echuca Specialist School students and staff.

"From my perspective the fight is far from over ... achieving the very best outcome for students and staff at the Echuca Specialist School will continue to be a leading priority for the Murray Plains electorate, as the Nationals continue to develop our policies in the lead up to the 2018 state election," he said.

Mr Walsh said he was proud to have stood with the teachers, parents and students of the school to fight for the best start in life for the next generation of community leaders.

"The Nationals in government were absolutely committed to the vision of an Echuca School Regeneration Project," he said.

"We funded the purchase of the site, allocated \$200,000 for planning and committed \$25 million to build this unique new learning environment.

"But Daniel Andrews smashed that vision when he was elected in 2014.

"He slashed \$14 million from the \$25 million budget to merge Echuca West and South primary schools, leaving the staff and students of the Echuca Specialist School out in the cold.

"The most disappointing part of it all is that the philosophy of a combined school with a strong foundation of a cohesive culture inclusive of students with a disability has been compromised.

"It's an absolute disgrace."

If this was a mainstream school it would be closed

IF ECHUCA Specialist School was a mainstream school, Scott Morrison's daughter would never have been enrolled there.

For no other reason than its facilities are in a deplorable state.

The teachers and aides are amazing, the school community is incredible, but the occupational health and safety standards are not just unacceptable, they are beyond the pale.

"But given it's a specialist school there is no option," said Mr Morrison, who is also the school council president.

"There's a school in Bendigo, I believe, and Shepp, but you couldn't send your kid there because it's too far away."

Mr Morrison's daughter, Claudia, 11, started school when she was five in 2012.

"She has severe autism, an intellec-

tual disability and is non-verbal," he said.

"Sending her to the specialist school was an opportunity to move forward with her communication.

"She's learning to become more at ease with the world because her anxiety is very high.

"Primarily, the focus is on her communication, especially with my wife (Meg) and I so that we can recognise her needs.

"The school does a terrific job — the programs they implement, the staff training and time they give to the kids is amazing."

Mr Morrison said the facilities were "embarrassingly sub-standard".

"Even at mainstream level, there's not many schools that operate in second-hand portals in a gravel car park that doesn't even belong to the school," he said.

"We pay \$100,000 rent which is

money we could spend on programs and equipment. It's a situation where we shouldn't be in."

Mr Morrison said he was demoralised.

"You get sick of hearing promises that are broken," he said.

"I was on the planning committee of the new school ... it was only at the eleventh hour that they suggested there was a stage two.

"We never knew through the whole process that it would be divided. For that to happen and then to miss out on the funding twice, it's almost at a stage you get sick of trying, almost.

"You think, what else can you do."

"You've got the most vulnerable people you can have so why are they not being provided for?"

"How does a school hope to attract more teaching staff (on top of its 19 teachers and 16 aides) when you've got such outdated facilities?"



BEYOND THE PALE: Echuca Specialist School council president Scott Morrison with his daughter Claudia.

STUDENT HEALTH AT RISK SPECIAL REPORT AND PHOTOS BY TYLA HARRINGTON

A first world country home to a travesty

ECHUCA Specialist School teacher's aide Deb Colliver was seeing red on Wednesday.

But she wasn't about to let her students know it because she quickly was able to get Kaitlyn Lewis (pictured right with Deb) smile for a photo.

Kaitlyn is one of two highly special needs students who are fed through tubes which require extensive cleaning.

But on Wednesday there was no water to do so.

Fortunately Kaitlyn only had to be fed once and the other student didn't attend.

"We couldn't go to the toilet," Deb said.

"I have two highly special needs students who are PEG fed (fed through their stomach).

"When you go to feed you have to wash your hands three times to make sure there are no germs.

"This goes into their stomach so if they get an infection, they die.

"This has to be washed and cleaned three times after a feed but we've got no running water to do it.

"We have one student who is fed three times a day. Luckily she wasn't there but if she was I would have had to ring her and say don't come in.

"So she would have had to miss out

because we don't have the facilities to clean her stuff."

Deb has been at the school for 19 years and even at the start she said the school was desperate for new facilities.

"It's just got worse," she said.

"When the school started we had 20 students but because it's now bigger we do have problems.

"We've had all these portables added on and it just can't cope.

"We've had sewage coming up through the sink.

"A lot of the staff have back issues because we don't have hoists to lift the students up."

When Deb discovered the school had missed out on funding she was furious.

"They are being discriminated against," she said.

"These are the students that are the most vulnerable and their needs are not being met.

"These are basic life needs that they need to stay alive. And we can't give them their food because we haven't got water."



Vulnerable lives are at risk

THE health and safety of Echuca Specialist School students — already abandoned by the Victorian government in its latest budget — were at risk on Wednesday when a pipe burst and the school had no water.

It would have shut the school if students weren't already at the facility but because some have to travel long distances, they couldn't be sent home.

Two students need to be fed through a tube, which requires extensive cleaning and water. Fortunately one didn't attend and the other only had to be fed once.

"What annoys me the most is that we are talking about their lives

now," Echuca Specialist School teacher's aide Deb Colliver said.

"We're not talking about school programs.

"We are talking about keeping students healthy enough to stay alive and that's what is so frustrating.

"To me because they've got a disability they are being affected more, it's discrimination against them because their basic needs to come to school can't be met.

"It's not fair on them. They have the right to come to school."

Vice president David O'Dea said the pipe bursting was not an isolated issue.

Raw sewage has also been leaking

at the school, sometimes up through sinks where the feeding tubes are cleaned.

The rooms are filled with asbestos and if you have two appliances running at once (the microwave and the heater) teachers have come to expect the power to go out.

An old disposal unit used to burn dirty nappies inside the toilets also broke on Wednesday.

"There's been problems with plumbing and toilets consistently," Mr O'Dea said.

"It's not unusual to see the principal in a pair of gumboots shovelling sewage."

President Scott Morrison said the school was not purpose built.

"The systems were never designed to cope with this level of service," he said.

"We've had toilets back up and overflow in the administration area.

"It's a massive health and safety situation.

"These are second-hand portables that sit on a gravel carpark that don't even belong to the local shire.

"If we didn't have the support from the community, who knows where we would be."

The concrete path from the front gate to the road was not laid until 2014.

"And that was due to parents getting together and gaining donations and committing their own time to provide that," Mr O'Dea said.

"Before that we didn't even have a path to the front gate."

The school has also had thousands of dollars of property stolen from it because there is no security.

"Buses used to get broken into on a weekly basis," Mr O'Dea said.

Parents say all these issues could have been addressed if the school received funding in the state budget to move into Twin Rivers. Since that didn't happen it won't be in the new facility until 2021 at the earliest.

It's Jye's link to the world

ECHUCA'S Allan Palmer believes school is his son's "saviour".

"It gets him (Jye) out of the house," he said.

"He likes to come and see the teachers and just everyone who is around him."

Mr Palmer said a lot of the students at the school did not have a voice to share their opinion.

It is why Mr Palmer is sharing his son's.

"We need a new school, it needs to happen," he said.

"Some students might be able to share their opinion but a lot don't have a voice.

"It's like they've been forgotten."

Jye, 13, started at Echuca Specialist

School when he was just five years old.

"Jye is autistic," Mr Palmer explained.

"He's low functioning and non-verbal.

"He's very happy when he's at school.

"He's got swimming today (Wednesday) so he's pretty happy about that."

When Jye went into kinder in Moama, Mr Palmer said he realised how important it was for him and his future that he be put into an environ-

ment in which he was going to be comfortable.

"He would last about five minutes," Mr Palmer said.

"Each day his mum (Margaret Vicary) would drop him off and because it wasn't his environment he would have a melt-down but then when he came to the specialist school he loved it."

Mr Palmer, who is on the school council, said it was disgusting what the students had to put up with.

"If it was mainstream it would be dealt with straight away," he said.

SAVIOR: Allan Palmer and his son Jye share a moment at the Echuca Specialist School.



FLEUR FINDS MORE STORY SUCCESS

By IVY JENSEN

BUNNALOO author Fleur Ferris' newest release will be launched in Moama later this month.

Found is Fleur's fourth book and will be on bookshelves from July 2.

Fleur said Found was written and edited under tight deadlines.

The mother-of-three started writing it in September last year, taking three months to complete the first draft.

"Then the manuscript went back and forth between me and my editor for about five months," she said.

"Part of the book is set on my rice farm (in Bunnaloo) and part in Deniliquin, although I used creative licence at both locations when I needed the setting to serve the plot."

Found is a mystery/thriller like her other books — with the pace and thrilling action of Wreck and the intense cry factor of Risk.

"It's a pacy thriller with lots of high stakes action, nail-biting suspense, jolting shocks and a bit of sweet romance," she said.

The story follows 17-year-old Beth, who is struggling to tell her parents she has been seeing local boy, Jonah, for the past six weeks.

Beth's father is a 200 cm, heavily muscled giant, who runs the local karate school, two gun clubs and a bush survival camp.

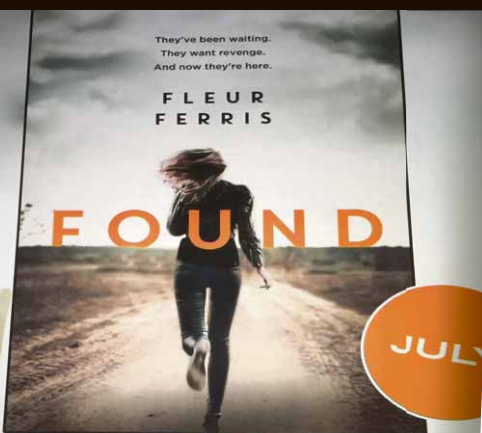
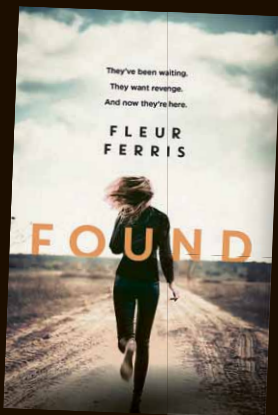
Before Beth gets a chance to tell him about Jonah, something happens which turns her world upside down and throws her life into chaos.

Beth is not who she thought she was. Her family's secret past has finally caught up with them, and someone wants her dead.

Found will be available at the launch, in bookstores and online.

The launch will be at Moama Anglican Grammar School Resource Centre from 6pm-9pm on June 29, with drinks and nibbles provided.

RSVP to functions@moamagrammar.nsw.edu.au or call Grace on 5480 5900.



JAMES MERLINO

REPORT CARD

6 June 2018

James Merlino
Victorian Minister for Education
Parliament House
Spring St
MELBOURNE VIC 3000



DEAR Mr Merlino, you have failed Echuca.

Worse, you have deliberately failed the Echuca Specialist School — you have failed our students, you have failed our parents and staff.

You have failed.

Period.

The last time I wrote to you I told you to hang your head in shame and resign but unfortunately and tragically you didn't.

Oh, but of course, you were quick to jump on Twitter yesterday and respond to a column printed in the Herald Sun.

I refer to your tweets yesterday:

"As I've said on many occasions regarding Echuca, we've funded the first stage of the regeneration project with the primary school and we'll finish what we started with the Specialist School."

Yes, Mr Merlino, you have said that on several occasions.

Once during Parliament Question Time; then in your response to our questions to your team in May. You told us about the 'huge backlog' of school investment following record low funding from the Coalition.

You told us about your investment in Campaspe Shire, compared to the Coalition.

You told us relocating the specialist school was part of the Victorian Government's vision and you would continue to work with the school.

And that you "finish what you started".

But when?

When will you give these children who are so desperate for safe facilities what they deserve?

When will you come to the school and see the shit that has to be shovelled on 'poo days'?

Have you seen the asbestos warning signs on the buildings.

Or navigated the rotting ramps in a wheelchair?

Have you got the courage to face these children and deliver more doubletalk about things you are going to do?

Look at their trusting faces that are slowly, surely — based on your track record to date, inevitably — being turned upside down.

Thanks for that Mr Merlino.

Yes, you've also said you will continue to work with the Specialist School and consider future funding as part of the "usual budget process".

Seriously?

What part of this do you not get?

The usual budget process is not good enough.

We do not have time to wait for the usual budget process. The school made the mistake of trusting government on this before and the government failed again.

It is too late for any of that — you should have funded this school in the 2018 Victorian Government budget. Surely by now you must know that.

As 3AW presenter and Herald Sun columnist Justin Smith wrote yesterday, it is a terrible thing to live in a safe seat.

Oh, don't we know that.

And don't you even try and pretend you don't know that too.

This is not a mainstream school, students and parents do not have a choice, there is no other specialist school in Echuca or surrounding towns.

So exactly what do you suggest we do here, Mr Merlino?

Sit in shit until 2021?

"No government has funded special school upgrades like we have," Mr Merlino tweeted yesterday. And no government has hurt us like yours, Mr Merlino.

But you know that too.

Yours in disappointment,
Tyla Harrington

On behalf of the voiceless victims

PS: And if you turn to page 5 you will see what everyone else thinks of you

Echuca Specialist School — the fight for justice

'We're ready for battle'

ECHUCA Specialist School council vice president David O'Dea is adamant this is just the start of the fight to get the students what they deserve.

He said he was pleased with the meeting with Member for Murray Plains Peter Walsh and other parents last week.

"We want to make it known to people outside Echuca so that people in electorates that aren't safe are aware of what's going on," he said.

"It will extend over a long period of time leading up to the state election.

"It was really pleasing the shadow minister is coming along to visit the school.

"We need to consistently get it (the conditions of the school and the fact it missed out on funding) out there. We acknowledge we've got brilliant support within our own community but it's also very important we get the message heard outside of Echuca-Moama."

Mr O'Dea said there was now some hope in the school community.



HERE'S THE PLAN: Permanent carer Sue Brown, Member for Murray Plains Peter Walsh, parent James Walshe, Echuca Specialist School principal Paul Marshall and school council vice president David O'Dea.
Photo: Luke Hemer

"Because we can see that it's going to be a state-wide issue, rather than just a local issue, which is really important," he said.

"We feel powerless because we get the impression they (the Victorian Government) doesn't care about the seat because they're not going to contest it.

"So why would they fund our school?"

Mr O'Dea said he would like every Victorian to know about the specialist school.

"In particular there are schools and places where the money which could have gone here went there and we don't begrudge any of those people.

"But we hope people in those areas would spare a thought for the kids here and remember that when they vote."

Parent James Walshe invited Education Minister James Merlino to the school to see the conditions for himself, following the announcement the shadow minister will visit the school.

He also invited Member for Northern Victoria Mark Gepp and Member for Northern Victoria Jaclyn Symes.

"To speak to not only the principal but the school council to help us understand why such a special need is not being delivered immediately," Mr Walshe said.

Education Minister James Merlino vowed to address immediate sewerage concerns at the school during Question Time in Parliament in early May.

That is expected to be done during the June/July school holidays.

School buildings are also filled with asbestos but the school does not believe that issue will be addressed.

'We will finish what we started'

VICTORIAN Government Education Minister James Merlino said he knows more needs to be done at the Echuca Specialist School.

"We will not hide away from that," he said.

"I have said repeatedly we will finish what we started and I mean it.

"It is a bit rich to now hear from Coalition MPs who have spent years ignoring the region's education needs.

"Already across the Campaspe Shire we have invested more than \$18 million on building and upgrading schools compared to a mere \$600,000 under the Coalition.

"The Andrews Labor Government invested \$11 million for the new Echuca Twin Rivers Primary School.

"The school opened at the start of this year as part of the project's first stage, completing a merge between Echuca South Primary School and Echuca West Primary School."

Maintenance issues at the school were brought to the attention of the Victorian School Buildings Authority on Friday, May 11.

The VSBA contacted the school principal to discuss the specific sewerage issues.

Senior staff from the VSBA attended the school on Wednesday May, 23 to meet with the principal and a plumber.

It has been agreed the works will be carried out over the June/July school holidays with anticipated completion before Term 3.

A contractor has been appointed and the scope of works have been identified. The system will be down for five days as a result.

The school has completed an application for funding through the Department's Emergency Maintenance Program to replace a number of air-conditioning units in its relocatable classrooms which has been approved.

Shadow minister confirms school visit

THE Victorian Shadow Education Minister Tim Smith will visit Echuca Specialist School to experience the deplorable conditions first-hand.

Earlier this year, the school was shocked when it was abandoned by the Victorian Government in its budget, having missed out on \$11 million in funding to move into the new Twin Rivers School.

Since then the school council, parents, students and staff have fought to have the decision reversed so the

Specialist School can move before 2021. They say the situation, which includes raw sewage seeping through the ground and into school sinks, is dire.

Member for Murray Plains Peter Walsh said it was appalling children with the greatest need were being treated with the least respect.

Mr Walsh met with school council president Scott Morrison and a delegation of parents to discuss the way forward on Thursday last week.

Mr Walsh invited the shadow minister to Echuca and said he was pleased to announce he would visit.

"He is acutely aware of the issues affecting Echuca Specialist School and he has given me strong support in the many times I have raised these issues in Parliament," Mr Walsh said.

"The community has united in protest and the shadow minister and I stand firmly with them.

"I still hold out hope the Labor

Government will realise that the decision they made was wrong.

"They have made a grave error in judgement and they should reverse their decision and immediately provide the funding required to complete the vision for a shared experience of students from Echuca Specialist, Echuca South and Echuca West primary schools.

"We must continue this fight."

The date of the shadow minister's visit is still being confirmed.

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what the people
had to say

JAMES MERLINO
AKA VICTORIAN EDUCATION MINISTER

IF SEEN DO NOT APPROACH, CALL ECHUCA SPECIALIST
SCHOOL AND REPORT YOUR SIGHTING

FULL STORY STARTS PAGE 2



JAMES MERLINO COUNTDOWN

WE DEMAND JUSTICE FOR ECHUCA SPECIALIST SCHOOL.

TIME REMAINING:

59 DAYS **00** HOURS **00** MINUTES

Dan does the old duck and weave

VICTORIAN Premier Daniel Andrews has been unable to confirm whether his government will make a funding announcement about the Echuca Specialist School ahead of the November election.

To the extent he dodged the question when asked by media during a recent announcement in Bendigo. "There will be many different announcements made in relation to schools and TAFE," Mr Andrews said.

"We have got about 1200 different projects underway right now — \$3.8 billion worth of investment in schools.

"So 1200 schools across the state being upgraded, 70 brand new schools being upgraded.

"We're always looking to add to that list and we will have more to say about education, not just in Melbourne or Melbourne suburbs and not just in big regional centres like Bendigo but in smaller country towns as well."

The specialist school was expecting \$11 million to move into the new Twin Rivers School in this year's Victorian budget.

But because it missed out it will have to sit in substandard facilities on High St until 2021.



NO STRAIGHT ANSWER: Daniel Andrews won't commit to funding Echuca Specialist School.

"There is more that we have to do and we are committed to getting that job done as well."

When the *Riverine Herald* asked Education Minister James Merlino's office whether the government was planning to reverse its decision to not fund the school, it did not receive a direct answer.

"We know more needs to be done at the Echuca Specialist

Well there is some history to this and there's been some funding provided

"Well there is some history to this and there's been some funding provided for planning and there's been some funding provided for early stages," Mr Andrews said.

"I understand the Victorian School Building Authority and the Minister's office are working with the school as we speak and have been for quite some time.

"I'm not here today (June 25) to make announcements about school funding I am simply making the broader point that we have done a lot already, we've got a lot underway and we will have a lot more to say about investing in the best schools so that every child gets every chance.

"No government has done more and invested more in special needs education than this government but there is more to do — that's the key point.

School and we will finish what we started," Mr Merlino said.

"The Coalition can't be trusted to build and upgrade any schools because when they are given the chance, they cut funding to schools."

That was in response to the Coalition's announcement on Monday that it would fund the new school if it is elected to government in November.

The Victorian Government invested \$11 million for the new Twin Rivers School which opened at the start of this year as part of the project's first stage, completing a merge between Echuca South Primary School and Echuca West Primary School.

The Department of Education said it had been in contact with the specialist school and discussions would continue.



HERE'S ONE GUARANTEE: Victorian Shadow Minister for Education Tim Smith, Echuca Specialist School school council vice president David O'Dea and Member for Murray Plains Peter Walsh.

Coalition will kick in \$11m for new school

ECHUCA Specialist School will become part of Twin Rivers if the Coalition is elected.

Member for Murray Plains Peter Walsh was joined by Shadow Minister for Education Tim Smith at the Echuca Specialist School on Monday to announce \$11 million to build the new school.

Making the announcement, Mr Smith said the current state of Echuca Specialist School was "simply unacceptable" and the funding commitment meant more than 100 students and 40 staff will get a new, fit-for-purpose school that is integrated with Echuca's other education facilities.

As the only Specialist School in the region, taking in students from an area spanning Cohuna and Kyabram, the school was gutted to discover it was snubbed in the May state budget.

"The 'Education State' is a hollow slogan. It is obvious the Andrews Labor Government only governs within the tram tracks and the Specialist School has been completely ignored and forgotten," Mr Smith said.

"This school is an important aspect of Echuca's education system and this

We would like to see the Victorian Government match this commitment by the Coalition. Students are missing out. It would be unbelievable if the Victorian Government ignored this announcement

\$11 million commitment will get them in the new building."

School council vice president David O'Dea said the dilapidated state of the school spoke for itself.

"The delays in funding are simply unacceptable. We have major problems with sewage and asbestos," he said.

"We would like to see the Victorian Government match this commitment by the Coalition.

"Students are missing out.

"The opportunities at Twin Rivers will enhance the education of our students.

"It would be unbelievable if the

Victorian Government ignored this announcement."

Peter Walsh said the Coalition wanted to finish the job and remove the Specialist School students from "appalling conditions."

"It's frustrating that this hasn't happened yet. Because of the delay the students now must move into a school with an established culture instead of helping to develop it themselves," he said.

"The patience of the school has run out. Echuca families will get a better deal on schools and education if the Nationals are in government in November."

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HELP ECHUCA SPECIALIST SCHOOL GET A PROPER SCHOOL

SPECIAL RIVERINE HERALD REPORT

We're marching with the army of those who have been failed

THE *Riverine Herald* has enlisted in the Echuca Specialist School Army.

But we're not just on a campaign, we are on a mission.

And that mission is to get the Victorian Government in general; and its Education Minister James Merlino in particular, to reverse the decision to not fund ESS in this year's state budget.

It has been 59 days today since Mr Merlino snubbed the school, condemning it to another three years battling some of the most woeful and demeaning facilities of any public school in Victoria.

Fifty-nine days since students, staff, parents and guardians were blatantly ignored at a time they needed the spotlight most.

It's been 59 days too long and now it's time someone is held to account.

I wrote to you in May, Mr Merlino, that something should have changed yesterday.

"But these words are not meant to pick a fight, Minister, these words are meant to encourage immediate change," I said at the time.

At the end of that piece I asked for you to resign.

The next time I wrote to you was on the front page of the *Riverine Herald* on June 6.

When we graded you on your performance here — I gave you an F in your report card, in case you didn't know.

Because you had failed our most



FLASHBACK: The front page of the June 6 Riverine Herald appealing for funding for Echuca Specialist School.

vulnerable students in such a blasé, out of hand manner.

Although you did trot out some political doublespeak about finishing what you have started.

Well if you don't, and don't do it soon, ESS itself may well be finished.

So I am writing to you again today but this time it is to put you on notice.

The *Riverine Herald*, the students, their families and the marvellous staff of Echuca Specialist School have started counting the number of days it has been since you hurt us.

And we will keep counting until

your government decides to reverse its decision and move ESS into the new Twin Rivers education hub.

Where the staff won't have to literally shovel shit as they do now, where students will have easier access to classrooms and facilities, where there is no potential danger from asbestos, and where wheelchair ramps are not rotting.

Where there is a sense of permanency, rather than being shoved into a swag of portables as if you were some afterthought.

We will update and publish the number of days every edition on the

front page of our paper, and post daily to our social media channels and website until something changes.

Yes, I understand your government funded the first stage of the new school, which opened at the start of this year, merging Echuca South and Echuca West primary schools.

Good job Mr Merlino — even if it was only part of the job promised.

Congratulations.

But tell me, why was ESS left out of this stage — and let's be honest with each other here — of all three schools it was the one that needed to be included the most?

And exactly when will it be included?

Can you please and finally answer two very simple questions?

That's all — two.

Without telling me about what you're already doing and how you're doing it better than the Coalition.

I do not care.

Not even a little bit.

No-one does.

The principals of Echuca South and Echuca West aren't facing any of the above challenges, from sewage to asbestos.

No, they are celebrating — and so they should be.

But this is where I need you to pay special attention, write it down if you must — the Echuca Specialist School should be celebrating too.

This week your boss, Premier Daniel Andrews, kept in step with you

and dodged a journalist's question about whether his government would make an announcement about ESS, the specialist school, ahead of the November election.

"There will be many different announcements made in relation to schools and TAFE," Mr Andrews said.

He went on to say the Victorian School Building Authority and the Minister's office "are working with the school as we speak and have been for quite some time".

Talking maybe. Working? You must be kidding.

Mr Andrews went on to say "but there is more to do — that's the key point".

No.

No it's not Mr Andrews.

The real key point is you've got 1200 different projects underway right now — \$3.8 billion worth of investment in schools.

And not one of them is ESS.

The key point is you need to get better at prioritising because our school should be at the top of the list.

But it's not.

It didn't even make the list, did it gentlemen?

So I will leave you today with three words: Echuca Specialist School.

Remember the name — both of you.

After this mission is fulfilled I promise you'll never forget it.

**Tyla Harrington
Riverine Herald**

Merlino coming but he has no idea when

VICTORIAN Education Minister James Merlino maintains his government will finish what it started.

"We know more needs to be done at the Echuca Specialist School and we will finish what we started," he said.

"You can't trust a word the Coalition says when it comes to school funding.

"When they were in government

they ripped \$1 billion from our schools and they will cut funding again if they get the chance."

Minister Merlino will visit Echuca Specialist School in the coming months although a date has not been confirmed.

Responding to the campaign launched by the *Riverine Herald* today, prompting the government to

change its decision to not fund the school in this year's state budget, his office said the Victorian Government had invested more than \$18 million on building and upgrading schools in Campaspe Shire, "compared to a mere \$600,000 under the Coalition".

The Andrews Labor Government invested \$11 million for the new Echuca Twin Rivers Primary School.

The school opened at the start of this year as part of the project's first stage, completing a merge between Echuca South Primary School and Echuca West Primary School.

The Victorian School Building Authority is working with Echuca Specialist School and with the owners of the property to rectify the sewage issues and work is now underway.

By the end of the school holidays the sewage issue will be fully addressed, Mr Merlino's office said.

Works will start on Monday and are expected to be complete by Friday, July 13.

Mr Merlino's team said it would consider future funding for the Echuca Specialist School as part of the usual budget process.

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JAMES MERLINO COUNTDOWN

WE DEMAND JUSTICE FOR ECHUCA SPECIALIST SCHOOL

TIME REMAINING:

59 00 00
DAYS HOURS MINUTES

Minister must see this mess

MEMBER for Murray Plains Peter Walsh hopes the *Riverine Herald's* campaign will result in a better outcome for the Echuca Specialist School.

"It defies logic to me as to why the whole lot wasn't funded in the first place," he said.

"And particularly why it wasn't funded in this year's budget.

"For the (Education) Minister (James Merlino) to say we will finish what they started they are not doing that and they need to do it urgently.

"If the minister came and saw the conditions that the students and staff and families deal with ... they do a fantastic job, given their surrounds but it would be so much easier for them to do their job and a better learning environment if they had the new building."

Mr Walsh's government announced last week if it wins the election in November it will fund the new school.

"We committed to it in 2014," he said.

"If we won government it would have been built by now and the students would actually be out there.

"Unfortunately that hasn't happened so what we've done is recommitted that money to make sure that does happen (if the Coalition is elected this November)."

If so, Mr Walsh said the school's funding would be in the government's first budget.

"If we have the capacity to do so, before that," he said.

"We asked questions to the minister during Question Time but apart from a rant about the fact of the billions of dollars they are investing in schools we are none the wiser as to why the Echuca Specialist School wasn't funded.

"If there was that much money being spent in the system I would have thought it would go to someone as needy as the placement of the Echuca Specialist School.

"They are in portable city in what is effectively a carpark with drainage issues.

"We've all heard about the issues about when it rains the sewage comes back up through the drainage system, it's appalling in today's age.

"If the government is investing the amount of money in education why wasn't that school funded in the main budget?"

Mr Walsh has a clear message for the other side of government.

"Come up here, make an announcement and say it's going to start immediately," he said.



PLAYGROUND BLITZ: Rock Solid Gardening Supplies owner Peter Woods (front) with (from left) Echuca Specialist School principal Paul Marshall, Chris Stephens from Mawsons, Jay Francis and Jordan Mason from Land Effects, Peter Barker from Newtecpoly, Rock Solid owner Rebecca Woods, school administration officer Jenni Candy and *Riverine Herald* advertising executive Stuart Addicott.

School has a Rock Solid term coming

ECHUCA Specialist School's 'quiet' space will receive a facelift during the school holidays.

And it's all thanks to a Rock Solid Gardening Supplies project.

Owner Rebecca Woods said the playground blitz stemmed from a community grants program which her business, based in Echuca, started this year.

"The school was going to apply for a grant but I saw it was way beyond just us and we needed to get a few more people on board," she said.

"So we made a few calls to suppliers and they've jumped on board to do a playground blitz because the school really needs it."

Materials alone for the project are already totalling more than \$5000 but if more businesses show their support that figure will rise.

Rock Solid Gardening Supplies, Land Effects, Mawsons, Bark King, Newtecpoly, The Garden Planners, Central Hire,

Signarama and the *Riverine Herald* are the businesses behind the project so far.

But more help is needed.

"We're still looking for a painter and powder coater," Rebecca said.

"We're going to put synthetic turf down, fix up seating, potentially remove a tree and there's opportunity for a sensory space as well.

"There will be about 15-20 people who will be working to get the project done.

"The school has been knocked back on grants (\$11 million in the Victorian Government budget) and the kids need better than what they have here.

"If anyone came and saw it they would want to help as well. We have to give back."

As part of Rock Solid's grants program, more than \$5000 worth of products were handed out to almost 20 applicants.

"All but two received all or part

of what they requested," Rebecca said.

"We plan to run the grants program at least once a year."

The school project will be completed during the school holidays with the grand opening when school returns.

Any businesses that want to get involved should contact Rock Solid Gardening Supplies on 5480 7299.

"We're hoping to have a barbecue when the kids come back to school to celebrate the project being completed," Rebecca said.

School principal Paul Marshall said he had been blown away by the community's support.

"We've been amazed by the community and the Riv's support in regards to the disappointment of our funding," he said.

"And we've been amazed by Rock Solid. We've had other people wanting to come and donate time and money to get us to a stage where it's at least looking a bit better."

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HELP ECHUCA SPECIALIST SCHOOL GET A PROPER SCHOOL

SPECIAL RIVERINE HERALD REPORT

Parents waiting to really see if the dream does come true

ECHUCA Specialist School parents will judge the Victorian Government on action — not words.

School council president David O'Dea thanked Victorian Acting Premier and Education Minister James Merlino for visiting Echuca and making the announcement on Monday.

"But as he reminded us we should be judged on what we do and not just what we say," he said.

"It was particularly pleasing to hear things will start to happen straight away and that's what we judge them on — what they do straight away.

"It shouldn't take too long because the planning has been in the process for years anyway so I am more pleased about what will happen now and not so much what's promised the next time they get into power, if they get into power.

"Today is a great day because we've heard that."

Mr O'Dea said it was a concern the government would not stick to its promises.

But he said it was encouraging the announcement stipulated money would be spent straight away.

"A lot of the kids understand what they have been missing out on not having the new school," he said.

"Sometimes these things become about toilets and broken windows but it's more about lost opportunity to have a school that's purpose built.

"There's been a lot said about us living in a safe seat — one side takes you for granted and the other side ignores you completely so to have some success and move forward is a great thing."

Parent James Walshe said the community support had been overwhelming.

"It's one thing that the school has been asking for this for 10 years but it has been the strength and the support of the community that has really pressured our politicians to make decisions and make this happen," he said.

"Everyone has made this happen and we look forward to the school being built really soon.

"The community has really understood it and the *Riverine Herald* has been fantastic in making people aware.

"I have had people stopping me in the street saying it's about time we had this school and I'm not even bringing it up.

"When everyone is asking the right questions there's only one thing to do and that is to do the right thing and



SMILES ALL AROUND: Member for Northern Victoria Mark Gepp, principal Paul Marshall, Education Minister James Merlino, students Hayley White, Zach Phyland and Nat Tonizzo.

both sides of politics have decided to build the new school.

"Without people standing up the government would have got away with it again.

"There's been promises made for 10 years ... we needed a date today to bring this to a head and he's (James Merlino) certainly given it a date."

Permanent carer Sue Brown said she could not be more excited about the news.

"We have had amazing support from the community — they were backing the school so much — and now we're going to be part of Twin Rivers School. We should have been from the start," she said.

"We look forward to starting construction as soon as we possibly can.

"The kids really deserve it ... we've worked tirelessly to make this happen and we would really like to thank the *Riverine Herald* for all their support."

Project Echuca regeneration

Stage one:

Echuca South and Echuca West Primary School facilities — Completed

Stage two (\$11 million):

■ Special School P-12 — main building/learning areas;

■ Bus entry and drop off;

■ Bus/bike store;

■ Paths and bike tracks;

■ Southern car park;

■ Completion of north car park; and

■ Community courtyard

Stage three (\$5.7 million):

■ Competition grade gymnasium, canteen, home crafts and music facilities;

■ Southern sports oval — special school;

■ Southern active play area;

■ Hardcourts; and

■ Remaining 5-6 primary school building

Education Minister Merlino given a master class in people power

From page 1

"WHAT I've said publicly is that we are going to finish what we started," Mr Merlino added.

"And the Echuca Regeneration Project (see story above) is a big project ... what I'm announcing today is the quickest way to get this school built.

"It also means a brand new school for the Echuca Specialist School, that's great, and importantly there's

things we can do right now ... I've instructed the school building authority to release \$850,000 immediately."

When asked why it had taken until now to announce the specialist school funding, Mr Merlino did not provide a direct answer, preferring to try and turn the blame onto the previous Coalition budget.

"What matters is not what you say but what you actually do ... my commitment was we will finish what

we started and that's exactly what we are going to do ... we inherited more than 400 schools that were classified by the Department of Education as red schools.

"If you're a red school you are in the worst condition.

"We can't fix that in one budget, we can't fix it in four.

"We've got the biggest building program we've ever seen but we can't do everything in one go."

OPINION PAGE 8

Walsh congratulates school on winning the battle

MEMBER for Murray Plains Peter Walsh has congratulated the Echuca Specialist School community for securing a long overdue funding pledge from the Victorian Government.

"Every budget since 2015 has been so disappointing but this community has refused to give up and we've raised the school's plight at every opportunity in order to finally secure this funding pledge," Mr Walsh said. "Today is a

victory for students, families and the school community but we'll be keeping a close watch on the Andrews Labor Government to make sure it's not a hollow promise. The minister has released \$850,000 immediately for detailed planning and we now will expect the State Government to put the remainder of the \$16.7 million pledged today into the pre-election budget update that Treasury will release publicly in early November.

"Then we will know if Daniel Andrews is serious about this commitment.

"The students, families, staff and community of Echuca Specialist School deserve safe and modern facilities and I will keep fighting with them until we achieve that."

Last month Mr Walsh and the Shadow Education Minister Tim Smith announced funding to build the new school if it wins government.

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IN MY OPINION

Tyla Harrington

People power wins the war for justice

ECHUCA Specialist School, local business, the community and this paper refused to go quietly into the night when the Victorian government abandoned the most vulnerable students in Echuca-Moama.

Instead, together, with one \$16 million goal driving us forward, we started.

Not to just fight battles but to win the war.

And standing in the school's brand spanking new playground/casual area (paid for and built by local business) Acting Premier and Victorian Education Minister James Merlino ran up the white flag.

The seed money would be made available immediately; planning would start immediately.

It would be churlish not to thank the government for this backflip.

But everyone crowded around the Minister on Monday – and the Minister himself – knew full well what had brought him here.

The government had gambled it could shave a few million from its education budget – but picked the wrong school and the wrong community to do it.

Even then I, along with most others, approached Mr Merlino's visit with trepidation on Monday.

We received the call he would be dropping in just hours before he did so we were sceptical about the reasons behind that.

Then he dropped the bombshell.

He told students, parents, teachers and the media the government would fund the entire project.

But as always there was the stick holding the carrot.

The money for the actual build is only on the table if the Labor Party wins the November election.

Unlike the campaign to get this money, that's no big deal.

The Coalition was here weeks ago guaranteeing the same thing.

One of them has to win (hung parliament notwithstanding) so as far as the Specialist School is concerned it is a win-win.

Mr Merlino's announcement left many speechless, others shaking his hand or genuinely thanking him for finally listening.

It came on day 69 of the Riverine Herald's campaign calling on his government to reverse its decision not to fund the school to move into the new Twin Rivers School in Echuca.

A hub two primary schools already call home – and two in nowhere near as much need as the one left out in the cold.

The specialist school has been battling with deplorable conditions in High St.

Sewerage facilities are inadequate and warning signs about asbestos are plastered across many of the buildings.

There was a day when there was no water and tubes used to feed students could not be cleaned.

In the end students started questioning whether they had been shunned because of their disabilities.

Teachers were concerned whether those students' lives were being put at risk and the principal had been forced to, at times, shovel shit from the yard.

The writing was on the wall but I truly thought we were running a marathon.

One in which the treadmill was cranked to a top speed and main-

try hard enough, change can and will come.

One person or school in Echuca-Moama might not be able to do it alone.

But if we join forces and campaign as we have done, nothing is impossible.

At no point in our campaign have we gone easy on you Mr Merlino.

We've called on you to resign, hang your head in shame and generally wake up to the dire situation that is the specialist school

time you ignore a community, there will be angry and upset people pointing the finger at you.

That's what you signed on for.

And let's not beat around the bush, Echuca Specialist School should have been a priority from the start.

The conditions are appalling and it is difficult for me to comprehend a school more deserving than this one.

It should have been in the first stage because it is the school that requires it most.

Before Monday it was also difficult for me to comprehend you changing your decision.

I am not a pessimistic person but I am a realist and the reality for me was that we had to try to make change but it would be a long shot to pull it off.

So when you made the announcement on Monday it was with great relief to watch the weight of the world lift off that little group of students, staff and families.

Sure, it would be great if they could be in the new school tomorrow and it is sad we must rely on election promises for these things to happen.

But if we push that aside you have said planning will start immediately. The ball is finally rolling and while the marathon is not over, it seems we can dial the speed down just a fraction, catch our breath and continue moving those legs.

The school is celebrating and we ought to celebrate with them.

It's a great time to be alive Mr Merlino.

On Monday you said "what matters is not what you say but what you actually do".

You took the words right out of my mouth.

And make no mistake, while our campaign is over, we will keep you and the other side of government, to account.

Anyone can string enough words together to make a promise.

It's up to us to make sure you keep it.

So with that said I – and the rest of our community – look forward to working with you and your government (or the other side) in future.

This isn't a goodbye, it's a talk soon. We're determined to see this project through.

Until finally our Specialist School students are in the new school, permanently, and this marathon is complete.

At least until we find our next campaign.

Well done Echuca Specialist School, well done Echuca.

Take a bow. This one is all thanks to you.

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tained until eventually (slowly and sadly) our legs gave way.

The community would nod its collective heads, hands would be placed on the Echuca Specialist School's back, giving staff and students a pat, there would be apologies, regrets, and then the crowd would slowly move on.

But on Monday Mr Merlino gave them all hope.

Hope that if we as a community

– and that you're government compounded.

I didn't expect you to do any of the above.

It wouldn't be the first time a journalist with fiery fingers slammed you for falling short of a promise.

And it won't be the last.

You are the Education Minister for Victoria so for every school you leave out of the state budget, every

‘ Everyone crowded around the Minister on Monday – and the Minister himself – knew full well what had brought him here. The government had gambled it could shave a few million from its education budget – but picked the wrong school and the wrong community to do it ’

Riverine Herald

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MERLINO LEARNS A LESSON

ECSTATIC: Echuca Specialist School student Zach Phyland jumps for joy watched by principal Paul Marshall and permanent carer Sue Brown following the announcement of money to build a new school.

Photo: Tyla Harrington

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Make no mistake while our campaign is over, we will hold you (Labor) and the other side of government, to account. Anyone can string enough words together to make a promise. It's up to us to make sure you keep it.

EDITORIAL PAGE 8

By Tyla Harrington

AND the winner is the Echuca Specialist School.

After being pounded for almost two months by a determined grassroots campaign Victorian Government Education Minister and Acting Premier James Merlino snuck into town on Monday morning to announce his government will fund the entire Echuca Regeneration Project.

Despite not giving it a single cent in the May budget.

The backflip means the specialist school will move into the new Twin Rivers School; with planning to start immediately and construction expected to begin next year, taking 12-18 months.

Based on Mr Merlino's election promise, the school will say goodbye to deplorable conditions at its High St facility — including asbestos filled buildings and atrocious sewerage issues — and make the move in 2020.

If Labor loses government the school is still covered with the Coalition here just weeks ago to announce it would fund the project.

Mr Merlino's \$16.7 million commitment will see the final two stages of Twin Rivers built and came on day 69 of the Riverine

Herald's campaign to reverse Mr Merlino's budget decision to not fund the school.

Principal Paul Marshall said he was thrilled.

“The community really does deserve this ... especially because we can move onto the planning straight away,” he said.

“I was speechless when Mr Merlino announced the funding.”

Mr Merlino said his government would immediately fund \$850,000 to finalise planning for the final two stages of the project.

Planning work is expected to be finished by the end of the year which should mean whoever is elected will be able to turn the first sod to start construction next year.

The government will invest a further \$5.7 million (on top of the required \$11 million) to complete stage three, which includes a new competition grade gym with music and arts facilities, the final classrooms at the primary school, as well as a sports oval, play areas, and hard courts at the special school.

“We've been getting lots of correspondence and I promised I would come here to visit but I didn't want to come here and just visit,” Mr Merlino said.

CONTINUED PAGE 3. MORE STORIES, PICTURES, PAGE 2 & 3

RACING AT ECHUCA TOMORROW 4-PAGE FORM GUIDE INSIDE

