

Comparison of Manufacturing and Food Processing Industries: Chicago Area (Chicagoland/Cook County, Illinois) vs. Goulburn Valley (Greater Shepparton, Victoria, Australia)

The 2011–2012 report *Learning from Chicago* (written by Peter Botsman following the Aboriginal delegation’s visit to Austin Poly-technical Academy) explicitly identifies the Goulburn Valley / Shepparton region as one of the highest-potential sites in Australia for adapting Chicago’s poly-technical education model. It highlights the Yorta Yorta leadership (Paul Briggs, Kaiela Institute), the iconic local manufacturing heritage of J Furphy & Sons, and the need to connect young Aboriginal people to “the ongoing tradition of manufacturing in the Goulburn Valley” (pages 9–10). The report argues that a “Manufacturing Renaissance Council” model—linking industry skill gaps, schools, and community leadership—could create sustainable, high-quality jobs in advanced manufacturing and food processing, mirroring Chicago’s success in serving African American communities.

Below is a deepened side-by-side comparison using the latest available data (2023–2025). Both regions share a strong historical base in food processing and manufacturing, but Chicago operates at a much larger, more diversified, and technologically advanced scale. Goulburn Valley remains heavily agri-food focused, making it a natural fit for the report’s poly-technical vision.

Key Industry Comparison Table (2023–2025 data)

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Aspect	Chicago Area (Chicagoland / Cook County, IL)	Goulburn Valley (Greater Shepparton & surrounds, VIC)	Relevance to Learning from Chicago Report
Overall Manufacturing Output/Scale	~\$105B GRP contribution (Illinois-wide); Cook County ~192,000+ manufacturing jobs. Highly diversified (food, machinery, metals, plastics, clean tech, advanced materials).	Part of Victoria’s \$9.7B+ food & fibre sector. Regional manufacturing dominated by food processing (~\$3B+ annual contribution in Greater Shepparton alone).	Report (pp. 6, 9) calls for Renaissance Councils in Shepparton to link local manufacturers (e.g., Furphy) with schools to address skill gaps—exactly the Chicago model.
Food & Beverage Processing	#1 in the US. \$11.8B–\$12B annual output; 72,000+ jobs	Major Australian hub. Dairy (52% of regional food mfg), fruit/veg processing	Direct parallel: Report (pp. 5–7) stresses “Advanced Manufacturing +

	(metro). Strong growth (+\$1.4B since 2017). Major players: Mondelez, Kraft Heinz, PepsiCo, ADM. Major R&D and innovation hub.	(22%). >\$3B annual value; 66.5% of all regional manufacturing jobs. Key firms: Saputo, SPC Ardmona, Bega.	World Class Education = Sustainable Communities.” Goulburn Valley’s food-processing base is ideal for poly-tech training in automation, CNC, robotics, and precision processing.
Employment Share & Wages	Manufacturing ~10–12% of regional jobs. Food mfg highly concentrated; average wages \$65k–\$85k+ with strong union benefits in advanced roles.	Food/grocery mfg = largest manufacturing sector (66.5% of jobs). High regional reliance; seasonal pressures in horticulture/dairy.	Report (pp. 18–20) notes Chicago’s skill “chasms” post-deindustrialisation; Goulburn Valley faces similar youth disconnection and skill mismatches in food processing.
Technology & Advanced Manufacturing	Heavy automation, robotics, AI/cyber-mental systems (e.g., Caterpillar, Winzlear Gear). Austin Poly-tech trains in calculus + CNC machining + NIMS credentials.	Increasing automation in dairy/fruit lines (robotic packaging, AI quality control, precision fermentation). Still more traditional/seasonal than Chicago. Growing precision agriculture and value-adding.	Core of report (pp. 23–27): Delegation saw robots and cyber manufacturing; Chaseley Walker’s experience showed Aboriginal youth can excel. Poly-tech model would “leap-frog” traditional barriers in Goulburn Valley.
Major Firms & Innovation	Mondelez, Kraft Heinz, PepsiCo, ADM, Caterpillar, Boeing suppliers. Strong R&D ecosystem with universities and innovation districts.	Saputo, SPC Ardmona, Bega, Simplot, Furphy & Sons (heritage engineering). Growing innovation in dairy tech and food science.	Report emphasises linking local iconic firms (e.g., Furphy) with schools and youth — same model Chicago used successfully.
Challenges & Opportunities	Post-1980s deindustrialisation overcome via	Globalisation, water/climate pressures,	Report (pp. 10–13) proposes exactly this: Phase 1

	Renaissance Council + poly-tech schools. Skill shortages persist despite 3M+ unfilled US manufacturing jobs nationally. Strong export and supply-chain resilience.	seasonal labour shortages. Strong growth in exports (dairy, fruit to Asia). High potential for value-adding and automation.	planning (2011–12), then curricula rollout (2012–16) and lifelong pathways. Shepparton/Yorta Yorta named as lead region.
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Firm-Level Case Studies

1. Food Processing Giants

- Chicago: Mondelez International & Kraft Heinz Mondelez (headquartered in Chicago) and Kraft Heinz are global leaders in snacks and packaged foods. Together they employ thousands in the region and drive innovation in automation, AI-driven quality control, and sustainable packaging. These firms actively partner with local poly-technical programs to recruit skilled technicians trained in robotics and data analytics.
- Goulburn Valley: Saputo Dairy Australia (Shepparton operations) Saputo is one of the world’s top 10 dairy processors with major plants in Shepparton. It processes billions of litres of milk annually into cheese, milk powders, and ingredients. The company is investing in automation and precision processing but faces ongoing skill shortages in robotics, quality control, and digital systems — exactly the gaps the poly-technical model can fill.

2. Heritage Engineering & Advanced Manufacturing

- Chicago: Caterpillar (Aurora plant, near Chicago) Caterpillar’s heavy equipment manufacturing uses advanced robotics for welding and assembly. The delegation in 2011 visited this site and saw first-hand how calculus, programming, and CNC skills translate directly into high-wage jobs. Austin Poly-tech graduates are routinely hired here.
- Goulburn Valley: J Furphy & Sons (Shepparton) Founded in 1873, Furphy remains a 5th-generation family business producing storage tanks, galvanising, and engineering solutions for the dairy, brewing, and petrochemical industries. It is an iconic local manufacturer with a proud heritage of innovation. The 2011 report specifically called for connecting Yorta Yorta youth to this “ongoing tradition of manufacturing in the Goulburn Valley.” A poly-technical pathway would equip young people with the CNC, robotics, and automation skills needed to

modernise and expand Furphy's operations while creating new Aboriginal-owned enterprises.

3. Value-Adding & Innovation

- Chicago: Winzlear Gear (visited by the 2011 delegation) A precision machining firm using 24/7 robotics to produce millions of parts annually. It exemplifies the “cyber-mental age” the report highlights.
- Goulburn Valley: SPC Ardmona & Bega SPC Ardmona (fruit processing) and Bega (dairy/cheese) are investing in automated lines and precision fermentation. These firms need technicians trained in programming, data analytics, and process control — skills that a Shepparton poly-technical program could deliver directly.

Direct Links to the Report and Ongoing Relevance (2026 Perspective)

1. Shepparton as the Priority Site The report (pages 9–10) singles out Shepparton and urges Yorta Yorta leaders to lead a local Renaissance Council. Today, with Saputo, Bega, SPC Ardmona, and Furphy as anchor firms, the case for poly-technical training is even stronger.
2. Skill Gaps and Poly-Technical Solution Chicago overcame “skill chasms” through Austin Poly-tech. Goulburn Valley faces parallel mismatches in advanced food manufacturing. The model (calculus → programming → CNC → industry credentials) directly addresses the report's call for “direct skill acquisition for at-risk communities.”
3. Sustainable Communities for Aboriginal Youth The report emphasises leap-frogging barriers and owning wealth-creating businesses. In Goulburn Valley, this means Yorta Yorta young people gaining skilled roles at Saputo, Furphy, or Bega — and eventually owning or leading local enterprises.
4. Renaissance Council Model Still Relevant Chicago's success came from a 65-employer council + CLCR facilitation. The same model, led by the Munarra Centre and Kaiela Institute, is needed in Shepparton to link firms like Furphy and Saputo with schools and youth.

Bottom line: Chicago's food and advanced manufacturing renaissance — powered by poly-technical education — turned deindustrialisation into opportunity for African American communities. Goulburn Valley has the raw ingredients (major food-processing cluster + iconic firms like Furphy + strong Yorta Yorta leadership) to do the same. The 2011 report's blueprint remains highly relevant and actionable in 2026.

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