



*Australian Council of
State School Organisations Inc.*

Hon Julia Gillard MP
Deputy Prime Minister of Australia
Minister for Education, Employment, Workplace Relations & Social Inclusion
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Deputy Prime Minister

National Asian Languages & Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP)

Introduction

I am writing in response to your letter of 27 March 2008 outlining your approach to the design and development of a national implementation strategy for the investment of \$62.4 million over the period 2008 – 2011 to provide additional Asian languages classes and necessary support and development arrangements for students in Asian languages and studies programs in high schools.

You have invited the active participation of the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and of the Australian Parents Council (APC) in a co-ordinated approach to implement the NALSSP and address current languages education issues.

We confirm our strong commitment to work in active and positive partnership with the Australian government and the Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations in particular, to achieve the purpose and objectives of this important national initiative.

We welcome your recognition of parents as key stakeholders with an essential role in this process – a role reflected in research around the world, and a major finding of the December 2002 Report of the national Review of Languages Other than English in Australian Schools.

We also particularly welcome your direction to your Department to work with the Australian Council of State School Organisations to collect information on the current state of languages to shape the implementation of the NALSSP.

You have also sought our advice in terms of :

- The most pressing school languages education issues facing schools from a parent's perspective; and
- How best to implement the NALSSP and address current languages education issues

Key Implementation Issues in Brief

In summary: ACSSO proposes a "seven element" approach to the design of an implementation strategy for the national Asian languages policy which covers the following six clear actions that could be taken by the Australian Government acting in concert with the State and Territory Governments:

- **Centres of Excellence Schools** – identify as national "hubs"
- **Clusters of schools** - working together sharing expertise and resources
- **Collaborations** – with stakeholders locally, nationally and internationally
- **Communities** – drawing on the rich language potential on our doorstep
- **Cyber-Classroom** – leveraging all the complementary opportunities of technology

- **Concept Validation** – an action plan for 2008-2009; plus
- **Critical threshold issue: the role of parents** whose acceptance or rejection of the value of language learning is one of the most fundamental factors influencing the future of Australia and the growth of second languages.

Part One of this response will deal briefly with three major contextual issues:

- Need for collection of consistent, complete and reliable national data to support effective strategic planning
- Need for parent and community engagement and involvement from inception to evaluation, at national, state, regional and local community levels
- Benefit of declaration of 2009 as the Australian Year of Languages and Intercultural Dialogue

Part Two of this response will deal briefly with the elements of implementation of NALSSP summarised above.

PART ONE: Contextual Issues

1. Need for collection of consistent, complete and reliable national data

As has been repeatedly demonstrated in a variety of Reviews of languages education conducted over many years - and most recently and forcefully highlighted in the report of the *“Investigation of the State and Nature of Languages in Australian Schools”* - a fundamental limitation and barrier to effective strategic planning is the continuing lack of consistent, complete or reliable data at local, state and national level, and a corresponding lack of complete or consistent data series from year to year, in respect of:

- **Student participation rates**
 - at each level of schooling
 - by language at each level of schooling
 - disaggregated by states and territories and
 - ideally also by regions and postcodes to enable analysis in the context of related National Census Data 1996, 2001, and 2006 onwards
- **Teacher workforce planning data, including**
 - characteristics and demographics of the available resource “pool”,
 - movements into and out from the profession
 - potential future pressures of supply and demand
 - disaggregated by languages
 - and ideally also by regions and postcodes to link with student data above

The need for the establishment and maintenance on a cost-effective consistent national basis of such a data collection and analysis framework is clearly an immediate and high priority.

2. Engagement and involvement of parents, families and the wider community as active partners in the process

ACSSO/APC research in 2006 indicated that some 80% of parents identified the need to be involved – but only 15% felt they had sufficiently been brought into the process. As noted above, parent acceptance or rejection of the value of language learning is one of the most fundamental factors influencing the future of Australia and the growth of second languages.

This critical need for informed positive parent and family engagement was an important finding of the December 2002 Report *National Review of Languages Other than English Education Programs* – and remains at least as important an enabling factor today and for the future.

It is essential that parents be actively and participatively involved from inception of the implementation design process through to delivery and evaluation – and at all levels: national, state, regional and in each local community.

3. Unifying focus – Declaration and resourcing of 2009 as the Australian Year of Languages and Intercultural Dialogue

Internationally we observe the positive ways in which the European Year of Languages 2001 and the US Year of Languages 2005 operated to raise the profile of languages education and support a variety of significant initiatives whose benefits continue.

These same positive benefits and leveraging of new initiatives are also evident in the current European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008.

The Statement and Plan for Languages in Australian Schools 2005-2008 adopted by MCEETYA envisaged an Australian Year of Languages, potentially to take place in 2008 – but this initiative has not so far eventuated.

The declaration – and appropriate resourcing – of 2009 as the Australian Year of Languages and Intercultural Dialogue would be of immense benefit (both symbolic and practical – and both within Australia and in terms of our international standing) to create the appropriate context to support and sustain the implementation of NALSSP.

Part Two: Implementation Elements for NALSSP to address current language education issues

The strategic focus of the NALSSP is on the High School years, particularly upon countering the significantly steep levels of attrition which appear to be evident through from Years 9-12. Over the past 20 years a constant outcome measure has been the percentage of students who graduate at Year 12 with a language subject in their portfolio. Back in 1990 a target of 25% by 2001 was established; and in 1994 a target of 25% by 2006, with 15% in Asian languages and 10% in others.

However, the actual results through that period have averaged some 13% nationally, with wide variations from state to state: from 20% in Victoria to under 6% in Queensland.

Local Issues: Timetabling

Emerging from ACSSO's ongoing discussions with schools and their communities, it seems clear to us that one very significant local factor affecting the levels of attrition in each school, in each jurisdiction in the latter years of secondary, is clearly related to timetabling, and clashes of alternative non-compulsory subject alternatives on particular lines, which force student to make difficult and irrevocable choices.

For this reason, even schools with outstandingly active language programs from early years, demonstrate a significant rate of attrition in the critical years 9-12.

At a very practical and local level, therefore, the issue of access through more flexible timetable structures sensitive to enabling a continuing focus on languages and continuous participation through to Year 12, will be an important enabling element of the effective implementation of NALSSP in each high school community.

Local Issues: Co-ordination with feeder primary, pre-schools and playgroups

While the strategic focus of NALSSP is on the high school years, in terms of raising the Year 12 numbers and also of providing more intensive encouragement and support for young people who demonstrate particular abilities in Asian languages, it must also be borne in mind that linguistic skills are developed most effectively over time, and are best initiated from the very early years of schooling – in the same way that we develop our skills in our own language.

Thus, an important foundation for improving programs and outcomes in secondary school, will be to implement the NALSSP in such a way that it also encourages and orients the underlying languages programs in the feeder Primary schools that supply positively-motivated language students to the high schools.

This (and other strategies below) would also assist in addressing a major current problem in languages education – the “disconnect” between introductory programs in primary schools, and the languages offered at the secondary school.

“Hubs” and expanding virtual classrooms

The capacity of current technology provides the opportunity for any school to be a local “hub” for a virtual classroom which can progressively expand to include students at other schools both locally and more remotely – in other parts of the State or the Country – or beyond our shores. Just as the Australian National University is an international “centre of excellence” in the teaching of Sanskrit to virtual classes in New Zealand and the USA, so a high school with a cadre of excellence in e.g. Indonesian, can extend its classroom to include students at other schools in its area, across the State, across the country and across the world.

Similarly, a school with a cadre of excellence in Indonesian can work cooperatively with other schools each with a cadre of excellence in one or other of the target Asian languages, so that each has the extended capacity to offer a choice of all the target languages at a high level of excellence to all their students, whether or not they have an actual teacher standing in each physical classroom in their own building. If they are located in a local cluster, they can physically share staff and resources; if more geographically remote, the same result can be achieved via technology.

Interactive technology

Also, through setting up “sister school” arrangements with schools in the target language countries, using the remote capacity of technology, there is immediate access to a vast array of “authentic” linguistic and associated cultural material – and the capacity to build mutual inter-cultural understanding for the mutual benefit of all participants.

The other benefit of technology is that – unlike the teacher in the front of the class – contact time and learning access can be provided on a 24/7 basis: classes can be accessed online at any time, recorded material can be endlessly re-played, recorded interactive activities can be conducted between students and teachers around the clock.

Obviously an annual investment of some \$21 millions, if simply distributed to each secondary school in the country, would amount to some \$7,000 each and have little strategic impact except in terms of lifting the results in some schools already doing good work. Similarly, it would have little direct impact upon those schools which have current and continuing problems in filling their teaching positions or which have poorly resourced programs already marginal in nature and difficult to maintain over time.

Centres of Excellence

Therefore, particularly in the first year(s) of operation, it will be essential to work on the basis of identifying existing and potential “centres of excellence” which have the capacity to extend their “classrooms” beyond the school walls, beyond the local area, beyond State and Territory boundaries – and beyond our shores.

The key elements of such an implementation strategy would comprise a “6C” model, as briefly outlined below:

- **Centres of Excellence Schools**

- Schools with good programs
- Strategic Locations
- Critical Mass
- Complementary strengths
- Access/proximity to other resources – e.g. universities with language departments, local Schools of Language, other institutions

- **Clusters**

- Local
- Regional
- National
- international

- **Collaborations**

- Between schools
- With Universities and other tertiary institutions
- With Feeder Primary schools
- Other institutes (e.g. Confucius Institute)
- Ethnic Schools
- Local and other Businesses
- Schools of Language
- Schools of Distance Education
- Schools in-country
- In country placements for teachers, trainee teachers, students
- Teacher and student exchanges

- **Communities**

- Native speakers (cf Census data 1996-2006)
- Community organisations
- Multicultural councils
- Families
- businesses

- **Cyber-Classroom**

- Video conferencing (e.g. JOINET program, USC online facilities etc)
- Blogs
- NP3, I-pod
- Chat rooms
- Interactive whiteboards with remote program access
- Skype
- National linkages
- International linkages

- **Concept Validation**

- Identify centres of excellence and their "consortium" partners and players – selected for success
- Determine cluster characteristics and initial (and potential future) "boundaries"
- Determine needs analysis, funding and resourcing requirements, setting-up time-line
- Develop action plans participatively with all the players and partners including milestones, criteria for success, outcomes, deliverables etc.
- Establish quality assurance processes and mechanisms, reporting and monitoring arrangements
- Run!
- Evaluate
- Re-plan for 2009-10 including
 - potential further expansion of initial range of "hubs"
 - establishment and adoption of additional "centre of excellence" hubs

We look forward to the opportunity to develop this outline in more detail in discussion and to participate actively and positively in the processes to design and implement the NALSSP initiative across the country.

Yours sincerely



Jennifer Branch
President
2 June 2008