

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS (ACSSO)

The national voice of parents of students in Australia's public schools and their communities

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Languages Education: Shortchanging our Families – and our National Future

ACSSO is in full agreement with those commentators who have described the crisis in languages education in Australia as an international embarrassment and national disgrace.

The challenge now and into the future was put squarely some years ago by General Peter Cosgrove: *“Language skills and cultural sensitivity will be the new currency of the coming world order and provide the keys to participation in the global economy.”*

International perspectives affect how we should prepare our young people to take on an effective role in a changing world, in ways that bear directly on their own opportunities in life – and the economic well-being of Australia.

But across Australia the study of languages continues to languish and drift - in the wake of the 2002 decision by this government to discontinue funding the Asian Languages and Studies programme which had encouraged thousands of students to learn one of the four leading Asian languages and their cultural context.

We had to wait until late 2005 for a nationally agreed Statement on the importance of Languages Education. An excellent Statement.

But the linked National Plan for 2005-2008 is undermined by its vague aspirational objectives and broad generalised proposals for future activities. With no new funding - just recycling 5% of existing language money. And little achieved except yet another national discussion forum, plus a number of small scale data collection exercises which, in such a frequently-reviewed area of learning, should arguably have been put in place years ago.

Most OECD countries have or are working towards three languages as core curriculum and the forward-looking nations of our region are rapidly expanding their language capacities. Meanwhile across Australia we continue year after year with only some 13% of students completing Year 12 with language study in their portfolio.

This is indeed the crisis we did not have to have – and cannot afford to let continue.

There is much to be done, requiring bold, transformative leadership.

And the multicultural and multilingual richness of Australian society provides a basis on which we can build successfully for the future.

It is monolingualism that is much too costly for us as a nation.

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* ACSSO's Presentation to the National Summit "Languages in Crisis" 7 June is attached