

LANGUAGES IN CRISIS

I am here today as Executive Director of the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO).

Since 1946 ACSSO has provided a national voice and represented the interest of the parents, families and school communities of the 2.2 million students in Australia's public schools.

Today I also have the honour to represent the Australian Parents Council (APC). For a similar period, APC has been the national representative of the parents and families of the 1.1 million students who attend Australia's non-government schools.

On this issue we speak with one voice. So here I represent some 5 million parents. We communicate with them regularly. They are very sensitive on issues bearing upon their children's learning, personal development and future prospects. And occasionally they do remember to vote.

ACSSO and APC and our members have been particularly concerned about the prospects of languages education since the 2002 decision by this government to cease the funding of the National Asian Languages and Studies program. Established in 1996 as a co-operative venture between the States and Federal governments, over a number of years this program invested some 300 million to enable thousands of young people to access one of the four leading Asian languages and learn about their culture. In 2002 this vanished – except a remnant annual \$1m to the Asian Education Foundation to keep the tattered flag flying..

We are also concerned that the 2002 Review of LOTE [and national reviews of languages have been something of an institutionalized bi-ennial event since the early 90's without achieving much in the way of positive change] felt no action could be recommended pending appearance of the then imminently-expected National Statement and Plan.

Well, the Statement and Plan did not get out of the starting gates til late 2005. Great Statement. But from the beginning we have expressed concerns about the Plan for 2005-2008: which is mainly a matter of what we currently call broadly aspirational goals and objectives.

It expresses a general intention to move in the direction of forward. But with no new funding to enable that to happen. Instead, it holds back some \$1.3 million each year of language funds, to undertake some research projects. Even if this were new money, that would be an annual investment of some 30 cents per students. Without touching the \$10b surplus.

[Julie Bishop noted recently the Federal Government is providing \$112 million for languages education. Well, that's nearly \$35 for each student. What are we complaining about?]

In a spirit of helping move things forward ACSSO and APC have done four very simple things:

- Developed a **Directory of Resources in Languages Education** – great feedback and a greatly expanded edition will be published mid-year
- Launched a **national Website**: Languages Education in Australia.
www.languageseducation.com
- Publish a fortnightly **Newsletter** of the same name with a circulation of 15,000 school communities and individuals across the field of education ; and

- **Conducted a unique national survey of attitudes to languages education of parents, students, teachers, principals** This is currently on release as a Discussion Paper, to enable everyone to have their final input. The final Report will issue in July. It provides some clear messages where parents and students are coming from and their perception of the need for positive change.
 - *Languages from as early as possible in primary school*
 - *Compulsory languages in primary school and early high school*
 - *No reduction of numbers of languages on offer*
 - *Continuity and consistency of access from primary through to tertiary*

As with the recent Education Blueprint published by **Chamber of Commerce and Industry**, we see the need for transformative change across Education, and particularly in terms of Languages Education – and the need to establish a clearly structure and funded Plan to achieve that progressively over the next decade.

ACSSO, APC and ACCI recognise the need to resource all areas of education properly to achieve appropriate outcomes – the need on accepted research figures for **an annual investment of a further \$2.9 billion over at least the next three years.**

An appropriate element of this must be dedicated to the progressive transformation of languages education.

Transformation can only be achieved by a co-operative process between state and federal government, and one that brings in the contributions of all other players and stakeholders – including the parents and their organisations.

The figures show an urgent need to reverse the situation at the tertiary level – just as the 1996 Report saw Languages Teachers as the Pivot of Policy, in 2007 we must recognise the Universities as the Powerhouse of Progress.

Expansion of faculties and resources is a national priority. And the encouragement of students by such measures as an upwards scaling of Year 12 results in language study. Possibly with alternative routes on the basis of mature age entry and aptitude for returning students or those without the formal score.

All levels must be involved in the plan, and all levers must move synchronistically.

We must also set a starting point at which each new enrolment in primary school will take on basic languages learning as an integrated element of the curriculum. And resources put in place to ensure that as that first wave moves forward year by year, so the language program moves forward with them, and is consolidated behind them. So when they reach Year 10, that comprehensive and inclusive access program will have advanced with them.

Our children's potential future opportunities and the economic future of our country are being shaped by the globalised world evolving around us and development on the international scene. We cannot afford to let our languages capacity languish and drift, or be content with 13% of Year 12 students having some level of language familiarity. We cannot afford not to act quickly and decisively. **It is only monolingualism that is too costly for Australia.**