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12 December 2013  
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## **Review of Community Languages in NSW by Chinese Australian Services Society (CASS)**

Our organisation, the Chinese Australian Services Society (CASS) would like to congratulate the NSW Government for taking the lead and initiative to review the importance of Community languages via the Board of Studies. Whilst we support in principle the six proposals referred in the Board of Studies' Discussion Paper on Languages Review, we are of the opinion that these proposals are too broad and lacking in details.

In light of the White Paper on "Australia in the Asian Century" released by the Federal Government earlier, there has been little evidence of investment in language education by Governments in Australia, States and Federal alike. Therefore, the prompt discussion on Community languages, in particular Asian languages, by the NSW Government is very timely and is long overdue.

For years, despite clear evidence of the importance of language learning for the future of the nation, the Government of the day has put this issue on the "back burner". In his report published in 2009, Professor Michael Wesley (Griffith University) cited that Australia needed 50% of its population to be fluent in an Asian language within 30 years or risked falling behind other countries. This sentiment is understandable when one compares that in the 1950s Asia contributed one fifth (1/5) of world GDP only, and 2013, two fifths (2/5), and by 2050, it is expected to be half (50%) of the global GDP. Most of the growth will come from China, India, Korea and

Japan. In a speech on Victoria and the Asian century on the 9 August 2013, the Former Education and Work Place Minister Bill Shorten indicated that at present, 10% of China's students are currently studying abroad, and this percentage will rise to 68 % over the next 5 to 10 years. To take advantage of the enormous potential opportunities, Australia needs to focus on and develop its Asian language capabilities with our people to people communication networks and skills, encompassing the cultural and historical links.

CASS is a well established and respected non-profit community services operator providing a very comprehensive range of community services catering to the needs from cradle to seniors of Asian Communities. It has been in existence for 32 years and works closely with all levels of Government and many government departments and agencies, including the Department of Education. Apart from the provision of community services, CASS has been running the CASS Chinese School, a weekend community language school, and the CASS Academy of Arts for more than 20 years to promote the learning of Chinese language and culture. At present, CASS provides Chinese language classes at three locations, Campsie, Kogarah and Hurstville. We have accumulated a wealth of knowledge and experience related to teaching and delivery of language education over the years, and we wish to contribute to the Review conducted by the Board of Studies with the aim that language education can be enhanced.

### **Brief Account of Current Education of Languages in NSW:**

Before we present our comments and recommendations, we feel that it would be useful for us to list the information that we know about the language education delivery currently in place in NSW for reference in our submission.

Overall, there are basically three educational systems coexisting for the delivery of Community languages in NSW at present.

- a) The first system involves the teaching of languages in K-6 (Primary Level), Year 7 to Year 10 and Year 11 to Year 12 (Secondary schools).

For Year K-6, teaching of languages is not compulsory but could be included as part of the subject of Human Society or Additional Activities. Approximately 30 -40% of the primary schools have a Language program based on syllabus of 17 languages for schools mostly in Metropolitan Sydney. Top ten languages in ranking are: Chinese, Italian, Arabic, French, Vietnamese, Japanese, Greek, Indonesian, Aboriginal and Spanish.

In the case of Year 7 to 10, Students receive lessons two hours a week over a year but is not restricted to one language. They sometimes receive a term of Latin, Japanese, French and Spanish over the school year. If there is no developed

syllabus, the school can vary the teaching according to their individual needs. Dropout rate is significant in Year 9 and Year 10.

By Year 11 and Year 12, only 10% of all students take up a language even though there are Preliminary and HSC level courses available (Beginners, Continuers, Extension, Heritage and Background).

Language teachers employed under this system are required to possess formal qualification and a good command of English. Pay scale is set by the Authority.

- b) The second system of language education is to connect diversity which is provided through Saturday classes of 2 to 3 hours weekly during school term. Under this arrangement, the Department attempts to provide all Year 7 to 12 students in both Government and non government schools with the opportunity to learn background language if that language is not available at the weekday school. There are 16 centres providing the classes with most (14) in Sydney, one each in Newcastle and Wollongong) catering for about 3,600 students. A total of 16 languages are offered, namely Arabic, Chinese, Filipino, Italian, Korean, Greek, Portuguese, Ukrainian, Armenian, Croatian, Hindi, Japanese, Macedonian, Persian, Serbian, Vietnamese, Bengali, Dutch, Khmer, Maltese, Polish, Spanish and Turkish.
- c) The third system is the Community Languages Schools Program (CLSP) aka ethnic languages schools), which is being run as out of hours schools for K-12 government and non government schools, usually on weekend during school term. The State and Federal governments provide an Annual Grant of \$120 per eligible student to incorporated community organisations.

For teachers in this system, there are no formal requirements for them to be “qualified” or to demonstrate the ability to converse in English. However, teachers are required by the Department to undertake a six months’ course to gain a “qualification” in teaching students in the Australian environment but this basic standard is far below that for teachers employed at Government and non government schools. There is no set pay scale for those teachers in this system, and some teachers do it on a voluntary basis. Obviously, there is wide discrepancy in pay scale, qualities of teachers and programs amongst the schools. Also, there is no “formal” examination conducted by the Board of Studies, and hence, the results of students attained are not recognised by the Board of Studies and the mainstream system

The teaching of indigenous languages is incorporated within A and B educational systems.

## **Our Comments and Recommendations**

For our Nation, diversity is one of our core assets and we should tap in on those assets. In a modern progressive Multicultural society like Australia, situated in a region close to the rapid rise of Asia as our major trading block with much of our export going to those countries. There is an urgent need for the Federal and State Governments, to seriously review its educational policies and financial investment in language education. The current situation where high proportion of students opting out of languages in high schools is very disconcerting. For example, according to 2012 HSC course enrolment, only 967 took Chinese over the five courses with the Chinese background speakers having 826 students. Language education is really in crisis!

The discussion paper released by the NSW Board of Studies on language education is timely however it lacks details in terms of the amount of resources that the State Government will commit to the teaching of languages. It is hoped that in light of the White Paper on "Australia in the Asian Century", the Board of Studies will consider our comments and recommendations listed below:

- 1) While there has been review after review highlighting the importance of increasing investment in language education to achieve a viable long term objective required for the future of this country, there is a lack of commitments by Governments to embark on a common language strategy both at Federal and State level. Business groups have identified the low importance placed on employing bilingual staff, and overseas respondents view Australia as having low level of knowledge of Asia and its languages. We believe that major political parties should have a bipartisan approach on language education in the national interests.
  
- 2) The recent audit indicates that NSW is more than 2500 short of Asian language teachers holding appropriate and recognised qualifications to provide continuous service from Kindergarten to Year 12 public and private schools. This should not be a surprise when the number of students selecting language study for their HSC is low and coupled with high dropout rate of high school students taking language as a "major subject" in their senior secondary education. Students would not opt for language study as there are no apparent incentives for them to do so in terms of passing their HSC and planning their future career, when students taking hard core subject such as physics, mathematics or chemistry would be able to get a higher score rate in HSC, and those subjects are more relevant to their future career. The Board of Studies should provide incentives for language study and adjust its rating system to encourage more students to take the language subjects. We trust that an effective strategy involving very little costs to the Governments but which will enable a quick response in stimulating language study would be for the State Government (or the Board of Studies) to announce that studying of a language at a weekend

community language schools will be an extra curricular activity which will be taken into account when students are applying for places in Selective high Schools.

- 3) There is a perceived bias in the “scaling” of certain languages in HSC examination. We believe the Board of Studies should review this matter and ensure “scaling”, if any, be carried out in line with the White paper on “Australia in the Asian Century”.
- 4) Syllabus for languages teaching should be standardised by the Board of Studies with the curriculum revised so that a standardised program for primary and secondary schools is adopted. The Board of Studies should make the study of languages more interesting, creative, attractive and enjoyable.
- 5) The Board of Studies should also initiate effective marketing strategy on the learning of languages as being “valuable” to students for their future employment.
- 6) It is understood that children of Asian parent or heritage are disadvantaged in that they are not permitted to take beginners classes for HSC on grounds that they are seen as having an advantage over one that does not have an Asian heritage. E.g. An Australian-born Chinese is not allowed to take a beginners course in Chinese. We believe this criteria/policy should be changed. This restriction appears to be based on the belief that the students with Asian heritage, if allowed to compete in the beginner classes of the languages concerned, would have an unfair advantage over other students. It is however noted that many Australian students of Chinese heritage, for example, as well as their parents, are unable to speak and write Chinese. To deprive this particular group of students from attending beginner classes does not seem justifiable and fair. Furthermore, students from English speaking backgrounds or heritage are not seen as having an advantage over students from other ethnic backgrounds when learning English. It is therefore recommended that all Australian students should be given equal opportunities without any segregation based on racial considerations. Eligibility should be based on need rather than on race. We suggest that students with Chinese heritage and students from non-Chinese backgrounds be treated equally. The reality is whether the student has possessed the capability in using the language in practice and this sole requirement has nothing to do with heritage or race.
- 7) In many Asian countries, learning English is compulsory in primary and secondary schools. In many European countries, students are required to learn at least two languages from the start of primary school. We believe similar requirement should apply in Australia if we are serious about preparing our people with an Asian language in engaging with Asia in the coming Century. Therefore, studying a language should be made compulsory and the number of hours per week increased to at least 5 hours from the current requirement of 0 to 2 hours per week. Furthermore, to master a language well, it requires a long period of study involving a

few years of classes, not on a single term basis. The practice of “Jack of all trades but master of none” should be avoided in language education.

- 8) Consideration should be extended to the introduction of language education at preschool level as research has shown that the part in the brain associated with language learning would have advantageous effect if it is stimulated in early life of a child as the brain is more flexible and embracing of learning language at this early stage.
- 9) The system and policy on language education adopted by Victoria should be investigated and considered by the NSW Government as the results of language education in Victoria seems to fair well amongst all States and Territories.
- 10) The weekend community languages schools have been in existence in NSW for nearly 40 years under very difficult operating conditions. Over the long period, those schools have enabled a significant number of students to learn another language beside English and some students have attained outstanding results. As the Government has only provided token funding to those community language schools, in a way, the investment in achieving the objective of having students learning a second language has been very productive through this arrangement. If the aim of our Nation now is to give emphasis on language education, policy makers need to consider enhancing the standard of the community language schools, including the uplifting of the qualification requirements of those teachers employed/working in weekend classes run by community organisations. The current six-month courses should be reviewed with the view to continuously improve and strengthen the skills of teachers in this system. Also, formal examination conducted by the Board of Studies should be introduced for the weekend community language classes and any results attained be accepted by mainstream secondary schools.
- 11) At present community language schools can run HSC level classes, but the problem is that they are not accredited and as a result they are not able to enrol students to sit for the HSC examination. If a student of a community language school wants to sit for the HSC, the community language school must liaise with the student’s mainstream High School, prove to the principal that the community language school follows the syllabus of the Board of Studies, and meets the required standard. If the High School is satisfied, it will enrol the student to sit for the subject in HSC. If the High School is not satisfied, the whole experience will be a disaster for the students. This process can cause a lot of difficulties to the students and the language school, and can be a very discouraging experience. Many students have been deterred from continuing learning the second language if it is not offered in their high school as they are not sure if they could sit for the subject in HSC.

An official accreditation system should be set up and supported by the NSW Government for community language schools. In such a way, the results achieved by

students in accredited schools can be recognised. This will enable students to sit for the language subject in the HSC and also facilitate students to move from one language school to another if there is a need due to changes in family circumstances.

- 12) We believe that subsidy for Community language schools should be raised in order for the language schools to be viable and to recruit high quality teachers. The current Federal/State Funding for weekend Community language schools in NSW is set at \$120 per eligible student aged between 4.5 year to 12 year old, and limited up to Year 6. We propose that the amount be increased to at least \$190 per eligible student, similar to Victoria, and that this subsidy should be extended to all students up to the HSC level.
- 13) In the absence of an established standard rate of pay for the 3 hour teaching session many teachers in community language schools are not adequately paid. Some are even teaching on a voluntary basis. In order to attract high quality teachers, there is a strong need to establish a standard pay rate for the teachers and for teachers to gain the required qualifications. While industrial matters of community language schools is not an issue which the State Government has responsibility, however, if no assistance and support is given by the State Government, the remuneration of the teachers in the weekend community language schools system cannot be improved. The State Government needs to be involved on the resolution of the issue as it is one of the major stakeholders wanting to achieve the set language education objectives.
- 14) There is a tendency for keen education “entrepreneurs” to establish private community classes on a private commercial basis. As profit motivation is their driving objectives, their motivation is driven by the “bottom” line. This encourages varying rate, sub standard teaching skills, etc. To ensure that all community language classes are up to the required standard and no students are jeopardised, whether the classes are run by community language schools or private operators, an official accreditation system needs to be established. Only classes run by accredited schools are formally recognised by the Board of Studies and students are allowed to sit for language subjects in the HSC. This will provide students and parents with more transparency and greater confidence in enrolling in language classes.
- 15) Many community language schools face the issue of finding appropriate venues to operate. While many make use of public schools to run classes, the current practice of allowing school principals of public schools to decide on the use of facilities for a “pepper corn” fee is not satisfactory in that many school principals impose stringent rules and conditions on the use of their facilities. As a result school facilities are not utilised effectively and efficiently. If the Government is serious about supporting the learning of community languages, it should play a more active role in facilitating the use of public schools by community language schools. Accredited community

language classes should be allowed to be run in public school venues in the weekends or after school hours. Guidelines can be set by the Department of Education on the use of the venues. In such a way, school facilities can be utilised effectively and efficiently while community language schools can also be supported in a meaningful way.

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