

Languages Matter!

Professional Learning Conference

21 February 2008 9.00 am

Centre for Teaching and Learning

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Speech Notes: Andrew Barr MLA, ACT Minister for Education & Training

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on - the Ngunnawal people. I respect their continuing culture and the unique contribution they make to the life of this area.

It gives me great pleasure to open today's conference.

We are privileged to have three distinguished speakers to address the conference today – leaders in current research about languages and intercultural understanding who are familiar with the practical implications this research has for schools.

I welcome Professor Joseph Camilleri, Ms Lindy Stirling, and Professor Michael Worton whose speech today will be delivered via a recording.

As the seat of the federal government and the residence of the diplomatic corps, the concentration of people in the ACT who have traveled and have been exposed to languages other than English is well above the national average.

Our schools have a multicultural population, with the student population in some drawing from over 70 nationalities.

This unique situation carries with it the responsibility for the ACT to lead the nation by example in respect of intercultural understanding and language education.

Although the number of students studying foreign languages in Australia has steadily fallen over the past last 11 years, the ACT Government recognises the Adelaide Declaration of 1999 in which the study of languages other than English is explicitly recognized as an educational requirement for students in the 21st century.

As recently as September 2007, all states and territories have reiterated the importance of young people in Australia needing to possess intercultural understanding and exposure to learning a second language in their paper, *The Future of Schooling in Australia*.

In November last year, I announced additional funding to support the teaching of languages in public schools over the next three years.

This initiative will expand the learning of languages in ACT schools. By 2010 all public schools will offer a languages program to all students from year 3 to year 8.

This will be in addition to the languages programs schools already offer in the early and senior years of schooling.

Primary schools will offer languages for a minimum of 60 minutes per week for all students in years 3-6.

High schools will offer languages for a minimum of 150 minutes per week for students in years 7-8.

Languages programs in ACT schools will focus on the following eight priority languages: French, German, Italian, Spanish, Indonesian, Japanese, Mandarin and Korean.

To support this 2010 initiative, a languages support plan is being developed to strengthen the provision of languages education in ACT public schools.

The main objectives of the support plan are to improve the quality of language delivery by providing professional development programs and web-based teaching resources for language teachers.

The plan will offer a range of staffing and resourcing models to ensure students who begin the study of a language in primary school are able to continue studying the same language into high school.

The plan seeks to engage with local universities to offer professional development courses for teachers delivering languages programs in primary schools.

The plan will also provide schools not currently offering languages programs with additional support to assist them to introduce languages and will encourage networking with local, national and international educators to ensure best practice in ACT public schools.

Language teachers in the ACT will have access to high quality interactive software, learning objects, multimedia software and other teaching resources to ensure students in Canberra have the best possible access to language learning.

The additional funds allocated by the ACT Government will allow my Department to offer quality professional learning to school leaders and language teachers.

The conference today is just the first in a series of professional learning activities for our educators.

Under the government's plan ACT Schools will also have the opportunity to apply for grants of up to \$5,000 to assist them to purchase language teaching resources. Schools establishing a new languages program will receive a one-off grant of \$1,000.

Schools beginning a languages program will also receive ten additional staffing points to assist with the development of curriculum and structures for integrating the teaching of languages into their school plans and to support cluster networks.

The new ACT curriculum framework *Every chance to learn* includes essential learning about 'intercultural understanding'.

This places our curriculum at the forefront of contemporary educational practice.

The core content about intercultural understanding in the new framework has three focus areas.

The first is about understanding how individual and group identity is shaped by culture and that this happens in all cultures. It also involves making the transition from seeing one's own cultural values as the only possible ones, to understanding that all thinking and behaviours exist within a cultural framework.

The second is about developing the mental preparation needed for meaningful intercultural communication. Such mental preparation involves both knowledge about the culture and the disposition to engage with it.

As students engage with other cultures, they are more likely to step outside their own cultural frame into another's and to gain an understanding of how cultural practices, such as forms of address and use of non-verbal cues, influence communication.

The third focus is on understanding intercultural communication itself, in which at least some participants are operating in their second or subsequent language.

Students will learn about language and language variants and how speakers using a second or third language are influenced in some ways by their first language.

I am very pleased that the ACT Government is able to invest in languages education.

Investing in these language programs will help prepare our kids for a more globalised future.

This is particularly the case in teaching languages spoken by our closest regional neighbours and trading partners such as Indonesia, Japan, China and Korea.

As I indicated earlier, besides equipping our kids with the skills they will need to -work in various locations across the globe, the study of languages has a more immediate benefit in helping children understand and appreciate the variety of cultures and traditions that make up a vibrant multicultural city such as Canberra.

I hope you all enjoy today's conference and that you will gain further enthusiasm and inspiration for languages education and that you will take this back with you to your schools and students.
