

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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Time to get serious about rebuilding Australia's language capability

After a dismal decade characterised by lack of political will or purpose, by indifference, procrastination and neglect at too many levels, the need for sustained transformative action across the country in languages education cannot be further ignored.

We are at a point where the redevelopment of Australia's present and future language capability is central to our national interest. This is a critical issue that affects the future opportunities of all young people and the ongoing prosperity of our country.

While the rest of the world has sought to advance their language capacity progressively through this decade, we have been aimlessly adrift. We once set a target of 20% of Year 12 students to have language skills by 2001 – but nothing happened and we continue to bump listlessly along from year to year around 13%. "Australia's school students spend the least time on second languages of students in all OECD countries. Language studies have collapsed from 40% of year 12 students studying a second language in the 60s – to fewer than 15% today" notes Professor Tim Lindsay.

Not until 2005 was a strong and positive National Statement on Languages Education in Australia's Schools adopted to point the way forward. But that was accompanied by a four-year plan that increasingly appears as not so much a road map as a sequence of broad aspirational statements of indefinite future intent.

Increasing levels of disquiet voiced by leading organisations across the country, including the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the national parent representative groups, were focused in the recent discussion paper by the Group of 8 Universities "***Languages in Crisis: a Rescue Plan for Australia.***" And in the National Summit "Languages in Crisis" held in Canberra on 7 June, which brought together nearly 200 key figures from across the sectors, linked by their joint concern for the future of languages education, and the need for a radical change of direction.

The formal Communiqué from that Summit which has now been released is infused not with a sense of despair, but of renewed hope and opportunity for the future.

Working together with a shared sense of national purpose, we can turn the situation around. There is much that can and must be done immediately, where action is long overdue. This can and should be undertaken within the framework of an agreed medium and longer term plan, building progressively year on year towards challenging but achievable and sustainable objectives.

As underlined by the recent National Census data, the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of Australian society is a unique resource that can be built upon to achieve these aims, linking communities of native speakers as custodians and conduits of their mother tongues.

Our sense of renewed hope and opportunity is underlined by the recent **UN Proclamation of 2008 as the International Year of Languages**, "to promote unity in diversity and international understanding."

What better time to get serious about rebuilding Australia's language capability! If not now, When...? If not us – Who...?

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"Languages in Crisis: A Rescue Plan for Australia" – at
<http://www.go8.edu.au/policy/papers/2007/Go8%20Languages%20in%20Crisis%20Discussion%20Paper.pdf>

United Nations Proclamation of International Year of Languages 2008 Release – at
<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/ga10592.doc.htm>

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