

## Leading Languages

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The AFMLTA believes that in order for Languages programs in schools to thrive and prosper, a key ingredient is strong, committed and supportive curriculum leadership. Research shows that the two most significant factors which contribute to successful languages programs are quality teachers and supportive leadership.

The MCEETYA National Statement and Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005 – 2008, recognises this on p.6, where it states:

*"Effective languages programs require whole school support, particularly from school leaders."*  
And again on p.17:

*"Leadership and advocacy at all levels, including high profile community members, educational leaders, teachers and students, are required to facilitate quality improvement in languages education."*

It should no longer be required to convince anyone of the importance of learning languages. In order for our students to have a broad and balanced education that can stand up to international benchmarks, Language learning is a given – the National Goals of Schooling, and the National Statement and Plan for Languages (signed off by all Ministers of Education) attest to this.

It is shameful that in Australia, the number of Year 12 students studying a Language is approx 13% - our future success as a nation depends on international literacy – Languages are crucial in developing knowledge and sensitivity in this context.

Our education systems have not kept pace with the modern world. Our failure to teach languages well is becoming a national liability.

Change in thinking and change in practice is required so that languages are not seen as a luxury item or an optional extra, but as a necessity – as per the Nuffield Inquiry in the UK, which identified Languages as one of 4 key capabilities for all learners (the other 3 being literacy, numeracy and technology). Most European and Asian countries have a policy of at least 2 languages. We have a choice – change, or get left behind.

Why is it that it is only in Australia that one hears of the overcrowded curriculum? (and, by the way, why is it that Languages are the learning area that contribute to this overcrowding?) There is no such talk of the overcrowded curriculum in European and Asian countries which cover all learning areas, and several languages all at the same time.

We need to move beyond the question 'why Languages?', to actively addressing implementation issues so that the vision expressed by all Ministers of Education can become a reality. In the National Statement for Languages, Ministers have signed off on their vision of '*quality languages education for all students, in all schools, in all parts of the country.*'

There are many challenges facing all of us – challenges around language teaching policy and language teaching in practice.

The 2003 MCEETYA Review of Students Learning of Languages other than English in Australian Schools identified a number of key issues, including:

- a need for clearer understanding of what Languages learning actually entails – is it linguistic proficiency or cultural understandings or both?

- Issues related to teacher supply and teacher availability, in some languages more so than in others.
- A great deal of professional development on offer, but little evidence of real impact on teacher practice and on student learning outcomes
- Policy goals in place in many systems – with little evidence of strategies in place to genuinely achieve meaningful targets, and little evidence of evaluation systems
- The need for much stronger leadership at all levels – national, state, and at the level of the individual school.

A common feature of schools with successful and thriving programs is the support from and the modelling of the Principal and other members of the school leadership team. This leadership support can be illustrated in a number of ways, including:

- Supportive school structures and timetabling that recognise the cumulative nature of language learning. Students will learn more effectively in a 2 hr program than in a 30 minute program
- Ensuring that liaison occurs with feeder schools, where relevant, to enhance curriculum and program continuity
- Constant references at staff meetings, in school newsletters, at school assemblies to the need for and benefits of language learning (the benefits of language learning are clearly articulated in the National Statement on ps 2 – 3)
- School events and activities, occasional visits to classrooms, to emphasise to students that language learning is highly valued by the school
- Encouraging teachers of Languages to explore the DEST funded AFMLTA Standards for Teachers as a tool to reflect on their practice; and supporting them to participate in the Standards Professional Development program that will become available throughout 2007 – 2008.

Strong leadership is required at all levels. Without positive leadership, it is unlikely that our aspirations for our children, both for present and future generations will be realised.