Success in school through languages



Among the State Council delegates to tell their story to the Minister for Education Peter Collier and Department of Education (DoE) Director-General Sharyn O'Neill was Helen Kuehs, a German teacher at Baldivis Primary School.

Ms Kuehs (pictured) introduced herself as a literacy specialist, teaching literacy to 600 students and supporting the whole school literacy plan.

Then she revised her introduction, explaining she is a Languages teacher.

For some reason people's attitudes change when this distinction is made, with the work of Languages (other than English) teachers often devalued within the education community.

Ms Kuehs summarised for Mr Collier and Ms O'Neill the extensive research on the positive impacts learning an additional language other than the one spoken at home has on children.

"Learning languages in addition to English helps build understanding, acceptance and tolerance between people and breaks down barriers of racism," she said.

"Students who learn languages are better able to bridge cultural differences and they develop a strong sense of cultural intelligence.

"There are greater international employment opportunities for students who learn languages at school, regardless of which languages are learned, and students are increasingly choosing to learn languages in university because they realise they need it and often have not had the opportunity before."

International research has found that children who learn more than one language have better analytical and problem solving abilities than children of the same age who are monolingual.

They also develop clear advantages with literacy in their primary language.

Ms O'Neill acknowledged this last point: "I learnt German for eight years and I can agree… some of the best things I learnt about English were when you had to deconstruct it to learn German," she said.

But Languages teaching is under threat. In 2013 two-thirds of public schools in WA had a Languages program.

This year the number of public schools has dropped to one-third. This decline has not been seen in the private school sector.

This is a serious concern, and it is probably not a coincidence that the number of Languages programs has dropped so dramatically during same time as the cuts to school budgets.

As vice president of the peak Languages body, the Modern Language Teachers Association of WA, Ms Kuehs gets to hear a lot of the distressing stories from students and teachers who have been disadvantaged due to the collapse of so many Languages programmes.

Ms Kuehs said that the common argument “we are focussing on literacy” is used by schools who may not be open to the benefits of Languages lessons in the learning of English.

“It is no longer funded” is another argument Ms Kuehs said highlighted the situation where Languages was once partly funded separately, but is now funded within the SCFM, which has provided the opportunistic time to cut the Languages programme.

Another reason given for cutting Languages in schools is that there aren’t any Languages teachers out there applying for positions in schools.

Ms Kuehs noted that sometimes the Language positions schools advertise are for unreasonable conditions such as 0.4 FTE over four days.

She knew of one Language teacher who works 0.5 FTE over five days.

Ms Kuehs said there was a good supply of Languages teachers now teaching in other subject areas due to the conditions offered to Languages teachers.

These included travelling between two or more schools, with their office being the boot of their car.

There is a workforce planning problem with not enough qualified Languages teachers entering the system.

The DoE needs to make this workforce planning issue a priority. However saying there are no Language teachers available now seems to have become a myth perpetuated as an excuse not to have a Languages program.

Meanwhile, we wait in anticipation of a Languages policy rumoured to be released very soon.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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