

## Extract From Hansard

14 May 2009

### Chinese Language – Study In Schools

**DR M.D. NAHAN (Riverton)** [9.25 pm]: My grievance is to the Minister for Education, and concerns the study of Mandarin and Chinese culture in our schools and community.

Western Australia and China's futures are closely intertwined. China, as we well know, is the state's major export market and is a rapidly growing market for investments and imports. Western Australia is China's major source of iron ore, and the leading source of other minerals and energy.

As we will see in the budget, no doubt, we have great expectations that this relationship will grow. Beyond our shores, China's role will inevitably expand; it is on the path to becoming one of the world's superpowers. There are, and will always be, fundamental points of difference and perspectives between us and the People's Republic of China. The PRC is a very different society from ours, and has a very different economic and social system from ours.

To make the most of our future, we need to know each other intimately. To know a people, one must speak their language. Language is the gateway to, and the guardian of, a people's culture and character. The knowledge of Chinese language and culture has relevance beyond the PRC.

There are more than 30 million ethnic Chinese in the region outside the PRC; they play a central role in the business and cultural life of the region, including Australia. As reported in the last census, people with Chinese ancestry are now the fifth largest ancestry group in Australia. Moreover, China's languages—altogether—are the second most spoken languages in Australian households, following English.

Despite the importance of China, the large number of Australian-Chinese and the wide usage of Chinese languages in Australian homes, the number of people who study Chinese languages is very low. The Chinese community is doing an excellent job, particularly the Chung Wah Association and the Taiwanese Association. More than 11 schools are held early on Saturday mornings around Perth, with more than 1 200 children showing up to study Mandarin and Chinese languages—an excellent outcome.

However, the contribution from both private and public schools is worryingly inadequate. According to the data I have, in 2006 there were only 1 377 students studying Chinese Mandarin in Western Australian primary and secondary schools. This represents only one per cent of all students studying languages other than English in our schools. That figure compares poorly with Victoria, where more than 15 000 students studied Mandarin in the same year.

Only six public and three private high schools in the state offer Chinese language courses. The participation rate is particularly low in years 11 and 12, with as few as 71 students studying Mandarin at year 12, whilst in Victoria more than 3 000 study Chinese languages. The low rate of study of Chinese languages in Australia is in contrast with what is happening around the world. The Chinese media are describing that a "Chinese craze" is underway, with more than 30 million non-ethnic Chinese studying Mandarin around the world.

They estimate that this will expand to more than 100 million in the next few years. However, there are some positive signs. Rossmoyne Primary School students are taking up the study of Mandarin, and Rossmoyne Senior High School, which has had a long and active program, is working to become a specialist Chinese language school. I hope we help them.

The Confucius Institute at the University of Western Australia has become a very competent centre for the study of Chinese languages. Last week it conducted the eighth Chinese Bridge, a Chinese language proficiency competition for Australians under 30 years of age, which was filmed and will be shown on prime-time television this week. But more must be done.

In the 1960s, in response to the growth of Japan, the state government of the time promoted the study of Japanese languages in our schools and universities.

This led to the creation of the very popular Japanese study stream in the school of economics at the University of Western Australia, which trained a large number of Australia's Japanese-speaking diplomats; indeed, almost all the Japanese speakers of a mature age at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade have come from Western Australia.

It also led to the adoption of the study of Japanese as a second language in a large number of schools, and that continues today with more than 30 000 kids in Western Australian schools studying Japanese. We should do the same for the study of Chinese.

There are some real challenges in the study of Chinese. It takes English speakers at least twice as long to gain competence in the Chinese language as it takes them in European languages such as French, which is our most popular language.

There are also major challenges associated with the large number of students who speak a bit of Chinese or some Chinese language in our schools. This requires the development of numerous streams of Chinese classes to ensure that students learn at the correct pace and with people with the same level of competence. It is difficult for kids to learn Chinese when they sit next to someone who is nearly or fully competent in the language.

These challenges can be overcome. Japanese, which is a very popular language in our schools, is also a difficult language. In the past we faced the need to develop streams of classes in the study of Italian, Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Melayu for people who migrated from those countries. In other words, these are challenges that we can deal with.

I believe it is vital that Western Australia develop its cultural and linguistic competency to better understand and engage with China and Chinese members of our society. We should actively develop a strategic education plan to further promote, develop, encourage and sustain the teaching and learning of the Chinese language and culture in Western Australia for decades to come.

I am aware that the Minister for Education has recently visited China and has thought about these issues. I welcome her comments.

**DR E. CONSTABLE (Churchlands — Minister for Education)** [9.31 am]: I thank the member for Riverton for his interest in this very important subject and for raising the issue today in his grievance. I agree with all the member's comments about the huge advantage there would be if more Western Australians spoke Mandarin, and that we should have a greater focus on China as a culture for us all to understand more about.

He gave some obvious reasons for that, including that China is an important trading partner to Western Australia; it is very much a rising global economic power; it is a major source of students attending Western Australian universities, technical and further education colleges and other educational institutions; and it is a growing source of tourists to Western Australia.

During my recent trip to China these issues were brought home to me very strongly. The member will be interested to know that the report entitled "Chinese Language Education in Australian Schools: October 2008", which was an Australian-government initiative, argued for increased support for Chinese language education in Australian schools. It is a very recent report to which the Department of Education and Training is responding, and I will come to that in a moment.

Until now there have been a number of disincentives for young people to study Mandarin, including the fact that, as second-language learners, they have to compete with Mandarin speakers in assessment tasks. There has been a sense of disadvantage for those wanting to learn Mandarin as a second language.

There is also the significant additional time required to reach comparable levels of achievement with those of students learning non-scripted languages. As the member pointed out, Chinese is a more difficult language for young people to learn than are European languages such as French or Italian.

Also, a small number of children in a small number of schools learn and study it for the tertiary entrance examination, and those students are often disadvantaged in the calculation of the TEE score. These are not reasons for us to abandon the idea. I think we have to put far more effort into teaching Mandarin in our schools, but students in small cohorts tend to be disadvantaged.

Under the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools program, the Australian government has committed \$62.4 million over the next four years to increase opportunities for students in Australia to become familiar with four languages spoken by our Asian neighbours; namely, China, Indonesia, Japan and Korea.

Currently, only six per cent of students in Australia are studying one of those languages in their final year of schooling. That is a very low number. In Western Australian public schools the number is even lower; it is a very dismal one per cent. Korean is not taught in Western Australian schools, but the other languages are. Only one per cent of young people in Western Australian schools are studying an Asian language.

The figures that I saw yesterday indicated that about 2 200 students in Western Australian government schools are studying Mandarin, and a lot of those students are in primary school. This year only 39 students in year 12 in government schools are studying Mandarin. That is a very low number and one that we must put a lot of work into improving.

**Mr M. McGowan:** It is very hard to get teachers.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** That is a major issue and I will make that point in a moment. The Department of Education and Training is developing its proposal to be part of the NALSSP.

We are looking to significantly increase the number of children studying Indonesian, Chinese Mandarin and Japanese. A range of initiatives are being put in place, and I understand that another initiative will be announced fairly soon.

The other exciting development through the Building the Education Revolution program in high schools across Australia is the opportunity to put in an application for either language laboratories or science laboratories. A number of schools in Western Australia are very keen to be part of the language laboratory program.

I hope that a number of schools will benefit from that possibility. Five hundred schools across Australia will benefit from that program, so I hope that Western Australia will have about 10 per cent of that number with science and language laboratories.

**Mr M. McGowan:** It is also very difficult for students in years 11 and 12 to get good marks, unless they have that background.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** That is the point I was making. The member is absolutely right.

**Mr M. McGowan:** It is almost an impossible problem to solve for students doing their TEE.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** Yes, but I think that even encouraging more youngsters in primary and lower secondary schools to be involved would be a start. I agree with the point the member has made.

It is very important for us to encourage the collaborative partnerships with the Confucius Institute and others. I will be attending that competition on Saturday. It reminds me that when we were in China a couple of weeks ago, the vice-chancellors and I participated in the finals of the English language competition in Zhejiang province, and the result of that will be that 25 youngsters will travel to Western Australia in August this year.

We do not have a similar competition for our young people; perhaps if we had those sorts of activities, we would also encourage young Western Australians to learn Mandarin. I was very impressed with the standard of English spoken by those young people and the presentations they made. We asked them off-the-cuff questions and they were very competent in responding.

In conclusion, I support the remarks of the Member for Riverton. I am very pleased that there will be an injection of funds into this area and a renewed emphasis on the teaching of languages, not only Mandarin but also Indonesian and Japanese.

While I was in Beijing, I met with the Deputy Director General of the Office of Chinese Language Council International, Mr Zhao Guocheng, and looked at some of the possibilities for encouraging Chinese teachers to come to Western Australia.