

Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria

Submission

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Relevant ToR:

- 1) trends in student learning outcomes from Prep to Year 12, including but not limited to
 - (a) the factors, if any, that have contributed to decline;
 - (b) disparities correlated with geography and socio-economic disadvantage;
- 2) the state of the teaching profession in Victoria, including but not limited to —
 - (a) the adequacy of existing measures to recruit and retain teachers;
 - (b) training, accreditation and professional development, particularly for teaching students with special needs;
 - (c) the adequacy of the Department of Education's measures to support teachers;
 - (d) the impact of school leadership on student wellbeing, learning outcomes and school culture.

Introduction

I welcome the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria. This submission will focus on language education in Victoria and the loss of the state's only Vietnamese bilingual program in 2020.

Language education discrimination

Vietnamese is a growing language in Victoria and is the third most spoken language at home after English and Mandarin (Census 2021). However, the teaching of Vietnamese is discriminated against in mainstream state schools (and elsewhere). For example, there are a total of 276 Mandarin language programs in Victorian state schools, compared with 11 for Vietnamese. Research has shown this to be a result of the devaluing of "community" languages over "prestige/trade" languages in language education policy and a "monolingual construction of education success" (Lo Bianco and Slaughter, 2017). This discrimination impacts on the ability of students of minority communities to develop and maintain language and cultural ties.

The loss of the Vietnamese bilingual program

Vietnamese language education began at Footscray Primary School as a mother-tongue maintenance program in 1985. It transitioned to a bilingual program in 1997 as the school population diversified and by the early-2000's was included in the state's Designated Bilingual Program, opening the program to students of all backgrounds. The program won a

High Commendation in the National Literacy and Numeracy Week Awards in 2007 and the 2008 Victorian Multicultural Award for Excellence in Education. The success of the program became a defining feature of the school and attracted many families from outside the local area. It offered students an immersive language learning environment that extended into the surrounding cultural and business district, linking education with public life. Many program alumni have made significant contributions to civic life and credit the program with fostering their sense of cultural pride and belonging.

At the start of pandemic lockdown in 2020, the Victorian Department of Education closed Australia's only Vietnamese bilingual program at Footscray Primary School. This was despite a four-year effort by the school parent community to save the longstanding award-winning program. Over seventeen thousand signatures were collected in support of the program. Signatories came from all areas of Melbourne, from many language groups and many ethnicities were represented.

The Department ended the program citing the low number of available Vietnamese language teachers. The Victorian Vietnamese Teachers Association was not consulted by the Department or school leadership to address this issue. Opportunities are limited for Vietnamese language teachers and this was not addressed by the Department. Using this as a basis for ending the program hid the deeper issues that the Department and school leadership did not attend to over the four-year period. My role as a parent and School Council member over this time provided me with insights to these problems, which included but was not limited to:

- Vietnamese language teachers reporting inadequate support and mistreatment;
- The school's inability to retain language teachers (loss of 8 Vietnamese teachers in 3 years) due to mistreatment and inadequate provision of professional development;
- The school's lack of a language policy and strategic vision;
- Lack of bilingual education best practice models;
- Regular changing of teaching models;
- Ignoring parent-community offers of support.

The Department and school leadership repeatedly ignored my concerns over many years. The lack of willingness to work towards a successful implementation of the program and unwillingness to listen to parents and the community, despite both groups indicating their willingness to constructively work with the Department, showed a lack of good faith on the part of the Department. One example is the Department omitting data from its own commissioned report to the school council that would have detracted from its recommendation to end the program. This revelation was revealed subsequently through a freedom of information request I made.

Bilingual education offers the best chance of language learning success. Since the closure of the Vietnamese bilingual program at Footscray Primary, there are no meaningful options for students to learn and retain the Vietnamese language in Victoria. Although there are options for Vietnamese language learning for students at weekend schools, as well as the 11 Vietnamese LOTE programs across primary and secondary levels combined, these options are inadequate to achieve meaningful language learning and retention.

Bilingual education vs LOTE

LOTE programs deliver 1-2 hours of language learning per week. This form of language education is limited in achieving meaningful language proficiency. Bilingual education offers up to 12 hours per week of language immersion through the curriculum (e.g. science or maths in Vietnamese (CLIL)). This normalises language and offers students an immersive learning environment. Of the current languages offered in bilingual schools in Victoria, most are for either “prestige” or “trade” languages: Mandarin (2), French (2), Italian (2) and Japanese (2). This represents a disadvantage to commonly spoken languages such as Vietnamese. The difference between the most taught and most spoken languages needs to be carefully evaluated and not used as an excuse not to offer bilingual language programs.

Under-utilised teacher resource

A search in the Victorian registered teacher database reveals over 700 teachers with Vietnamese last names. However, only 14 teachers have Vietnamese language qualification (DET Report 2021). This represents a failure of the education system to best utilise the existing teaching community as a language teaching resource. Whilst acknowledging not all of the 700 teachers with Vietnamese names will have proficient language skills, this is still a high number of teachers that can potentially attain language qualifications.

The disadvantage for the Vietnamese language in Victoria is across all levels of education. For example, whilst Vietnamese is the fourth highest enrolled Unit 4 VCE subject (DET Report 2021), there are currently no tertiary pathways for students to continue their language training in Victoria. Compare this to Italian which has less than half the level of Unit 4 VCE enrolment but has multiple tertiary pathways. This further entrenches the challenges with teacher training and qualification for Vietnamese.

Disadvantage in school council representation

During my school council membership at Footscray Primary I was the only non-white member out of twelve. This is striking given the school’s location in a highly diverse area in Melbourne’s western suburbs. Although I tried to raise this concern and proposed options to address this underrepresentation, the school leadership did not act or meaningfully engage to change the status quo. More needs to be done to address under-representation on school councils, especially in areas of linguistic and cultural diversity, which tend to be of low socio-economic demographics.

Support for community

After the closure of the program at Footscray Primary, a group of community organisers, educators and parents formed ViệtSpeak, an advocacy group aimed at supporting Vietnamese language education and multilingual communities. As a volunteer-based organisation we have worked tirelessly to support families in their language education needs. We have also worked to raise broader public awareness of the prevalence of language loss in minority communities. However, we continue to face discrimination towards our work, which reveals the need for improved government institutional support to improve the language learning environment for minority language communities.

I encourage the government to meaningfully address the lack of language learning opportunities for Vietnamese in mainstream state schools. It is not adequate to continue to

push Vietnamese to the margins of weekend schools, which place extra burdens on families and risks alienating student interest. As the third most spoken language in the state after English and Mandarin, Vietnamese cannot remain on the margin of state education. Tertiary pathways should be encouraged. School councils need to deeply listen to parent and student voice and represent and reflect their school communities. State education bilingual programs should be expanded for community cohesion, academic success and vitality.

Thank you for your time reading my submission. I look forward to hearing about the progress of the Inquiry.

Sincerely,

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