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Language skills vital in an Asia-led world

Published in The Australian, page 12, Wednesday 23 March 2011

*Reform is needed to improve Asian literacy in schools, writes **Ben Jensen**.*

We are failing to properly educate our children to succeed in a world led by Asian countries.

There is little doubt Australia's future economic prosperity depends on our ability to embed ourselves in Asia's continued economic growth. However, our education system fails to prepare our students to succeed in this new world.

Substantial reform is needed to rectify the falling performance of Australia's school students relative to their Asian peers. Our students now perform at a level significantly below students in a number of our neighbouring Asian countries.

Unfortunately, we are also failing to provide children with the knowledge and skills in Asian languages and studies they need to have successful lives.

The present state of Asian language education in Australian schools is poor. Asian language education in Australia is typified by too few teachers, teaching in what are often inadequate programs to a small percentage of students. This means that by the final year of secondary school, only 6 per cent of students study an Asian language. Many of these are from Asian backgrounds. Only 300 students in Australia who are learning Chinese in their final year of secondary school do not have a Chinese background. Korea is our fourth-largest trading partner but Korean is taught in fewer than 50 schools across Australia. Not a single student in this country learning Korean in their final year of secondary school is from a non-Korean background.

And yet we constantly hear that Australia's economic future rests on being a part of continued Asian economic growth. Our children will need to effectively communicate with our Asian neighbours. They need to be able to work and socialise in a world led by Asian countries.

The children who start school this year will be in the middle of their careers in about 2050. We need to equip our children with the skills and knowledge required in 2050. Not the skills required today. What will the world look like in 2050? There is little doubt the broader Asian economy will be the largest in the world. By 2050, China and India are forecast to be the world's largest economies. Indonesia, Vietnam and South Korea will be among the top 20, surpassing Australia which is forecast to fall out of the top 20.

This will have a huge effect on our children's lives. Their careers and workplaces will be increasingly focused on the Asian countries that will be leading the world.

Our children will be more likely to be employed by Asian multinationals and will have to compete for jobs and income with others across the region. To succeed socially and economically our children must be able to converse in a world that is led by Asia.

They must have an understanding of the history and culture of the countries and people that will more frequently become their customers, their employers, their colleagues and competitors. Importantly, our children must effectively communicate to succeed in their working lives. Our children will fail to have these skills with the present investment in Asian language education.

Parents should demand schools increase their teaching of Asian languages. Any school that wants to attract more families should do so by offering comprehensive Asian language education. It would clearly differentiate them from nearly every other school and provide their students with the education they need to prosper. Governments should be supporting schools to make these investments.

Investing in our children's Asian literacy requires vision. It requires us to concentrate on what our children will need to succeed. The working life of a child starting school this year will run from about 2030 to 2072. Our focus has to be on what our children will need to prosper in these years.

Even if we make reforms now to increase Asian literacy in school education, it will take between 10 and 15 years to train and employ the teachers required in all of our schools. Given this implementation phase, the reforms we make now affect the children whose working lives will end close to the start of the next century.

A plan needs to be put in place with appropriate funding to improve the quantity and quality of Asian literacy, particularly Asian languages in our schools. If done properly, our present weakness will become a competitive advantage for our children.

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