



澳大利亞學漢語協會

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House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education Inquiry into Building Asia Capability in Australia through the education system and beyond

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1. Purpose and Summary

This submission from the Association for Learning Mandarin in Australia (ALMA) advocates for extending Canberra's Mandarin Immersion Program (MIP) into secondary schooling. The program already provides an exemplary bilingual pathway through early childhood and primary education. However, that pathway currently ends at Year 6. Continuing it through secondary schooling would consolidate student proficiency, maintain motivation, and demonstrate how bilingual education can support national Asia capability objectives from within the public system.

2. Canberra's Existing Pathway

Since 1984, ALMA has operated the Chinese Australian Early Childhood Centre (CAECC), one of Australia's pioneering bilingual early-learning centres. Located on the grounds of Mawson Primary School in Canberra, the CAECC provides immersion-based education in English and Mandarin, creating a natural pathway into Mawson Primary's MIP.

At Mawson Primary, half the curriculum is delivered in Mandarin and half in English. The school delivers high-quality bilingual education which is fully aligned with the Australian Curriculum.

Together, the CAECC and Mawson Primary form a continuous immersion pathway from early childhood through to Year 6. Beyond this point, however, students transition into English-medium secondary schools where opportunities to maintain and develop their Mandarin proficiency are limited to weekly language classes. There is currently no ACT secondary continuation—public or private—that sustains immersion-based learning.

3. Why Continuation Matters

The lack of a secondary immersion program undermines student outcomes and broader national goals. Canberra's bilingual students—many of whom are children of multilingual families—represent a unique resource for Australia's future Asia engagement. Yet without a secondary continuation, students miss the critical years when academic and analytical language skills should deepen and consolidate.

The *Chinese-Australians in the Australian Public Service* policy brief (Jiang, 2021) documents how under-representation of Chinese-Australians and low levels of language proficiency limit national capability. Only 1.2 per cent of Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade diplomats hold professional Mandarin or Cantonese proficiency. Developing a sustained bilingual pathway in the nation's capital would help address this gap at its root by producing a future workforce with strong linguistic and intercultural skills.

4. Evidence: Why Immersion Works

Immersion models are shown to deliver near-functional bilingualism without sacrificing academic achievement. Fred Genesee's longitudinal studies (1987) across multiple Canadian immersion programs found that students educated through two languages reached equivalent or superior levels of academic performance compared with monolingual peers, while achieving far higher second-language proficiency.

Similarly, Freed, Segalowitz and Dewey (2004) demonstrated that students in intensive domestic immersion environments achieved significantly greater fluency and communicative competence than those studying a second language through conventional classroom methods.

Immersion accelerates learning because it makes language the medium of thought, not merely a subject. Students use Mandarin to explore science, history and culture—developing bilingual reasoning, cognitive flexibility and confidence in authentic communication.

5. Proposal: Extending the MIP into Secondary Schooling

ALMA proposes that the ACT Government, with the Commonwealth, establish a Year 7–12 Mandarin Immersion stream linked directly to Mawson Primary School. The program would maintain a roughly 50/50 balance of Mandarin and English instruction across selected learning areas such as Humanities, Technologies and the Arts, while continuing to meet the full requirements of the Australian Curriculum.

The initiative would include bridging support for students joining without prior immersion experience, ensuring equitable access. Students would be assessed against the same Australian Curriculum achievement standards as their English-only peers, ensuring equivalent literacy and content outcomes. Teacher professional development could be coordinated through the ACT government, drawing on their existing bilingual education frameworks from Mawson Primary.

A modest start-up package would support planning, teacher release and training, curriculum adaptation and independent evaluation over the first five years. Canberra's existing system and experienced bilingual staff make it the ideal environment for such a pilot.

6. Implementation and Feasibility

The ACT already has a successful precedent in bilingual secondary education through Telopea Park School's French-English program, which operates effectively within the Australian Curriculum framework. The same timetable and accreditation structures could be adapted for Mandarin.

Initial planning could identify a suitable secondary site within Mawson’s catchment to host the Year 7 cohort from 2028. Evaluation would monitor academic outcomes, student engagement and teacher workload, ensuring that the model remains sustainable.

7. Equity and Inclusion

A Canberra-based secondary MIP would remain open to all students, not only those of Chinese heritage, similar to Mawson Primary and the CAECC. Bilingual and multicultural learners would find their existing language skills valued, while English-dominant students would gain access to authentic intercultural learning.

8. Policy Alignment

This proposal aligns with both ACT education and Commonwealth objectives under the inquiry’s terms of reference. It provides a direct, feasible measure to strengthen Asia capability by embedding language and cultural understanding within mainstream schooling rather than treating them as optional subjects.

It also supports equity by ensuring that bilingual excellence remains available within the public secondary system, not limited to private or selective schools. For the Commonwealth, Canberra’s bilingual pathway offers a natural demonstration project, linking community, government and education sectors in a way that could later inform other jurisdictions if successful.

9. Expected Outcomes

Within six years, the proposed extension would maintain and advance Mandarin proficiency among MIP graduates through secondary schooling, demonstrate parity or better academic outcomes compared with English-only peers, and strengthen student engagement and cross-cultural understanding.

Within ten to fifteen years, as these graduates enter the workforce, the program would begin to address the national shortfall in Asia-literate professionals, particularly in the public service sector.

10. Recommendation

That the Committee recommend collaboration between the Commonwealth and the ACT Government to establish a Year 7–12 Mandarin Immersion stream continuing from Mawson Primary School, supported by planning and evaluation funding.

11. Conclusion

Canberra already possesses the elements of an effective, inclusive bilingual education pathway. Extending its Mandarin Immersion Program into secondary schooling would protect existing gains, sustain bilingual proficiency, and contribute meaningfully to the national objective of building Asia capability through education. With modest support, this initiative could become one of Australia’s most tangible examples of success in language policy—one that, if implemented, might later guide other jurisdictions in setting up comparable initiatives.

References

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