

## IN THIS EDITION, *EDUCATION TODAY* ASKS TAM GOOSSEN: "SHOULD INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGES BE PART OF SCHOOL CURRICULUM?"

**BEFORE MY ELECTION AS A** school trustee, I had the opportunity to spend time pursuing a graduate degree in Japanese studies. On my occasional travels to Asia, I met Canadians who were studying and working in China, Korea, Japan and Thailand. They were from rural, as well as urban, parts of Canada. All seemed to be enjoying what they were doing and all recognized that the knowledge they were gaining about the language and culture of their host country was greatly enriching their lives. For those who became bilingual for the first time through this process, there was definitely no looking back. Yet, most of them had virtually no awareness of Asian languages and cultures until they had entered university.

While these students were able to acquire a second or third language at their own pace, students from around the world who find their way to Canada – and most likely to urban areas, such as those in southern Ontario – don't have that luxury. Immediately upon arrival, they have to deal with an English-only environment, in which almost everything is geared towards the unilingual person (French signs notwithstanding). For children, the question of whether the educational experience will turn out to be traumatic or not often seems to depend on the luck of the draw (i.e. the presence or absence of a skilled, sensitive, and sympathetic teacher early in their school career).

Fortunately, Ontario school boards have taken on a new initiative since the late 70s – the teaching of heritage languages. (For my purpose, I will call this program international language: elementary – a name change I will explain later.) Since we started this

program, research has shown that immigrant children gain confidence and adapt faster to speaking English and living in Canada if formal training is offered in their mother tongue – in other words, if they receive some form of bilingual education. These days, it has become good common sense to recognize that children and adults alike learn better in a supportive environment where their experience and background are respected as assets, not dismissed as deficits. In short, a successful international language program includes, among other things, a public recognition of the linguistic and cultural gifts that these immigrant students and their families bring to enrich the lives of their local school and its communities.

Frankly, there is a difficulty in having international language programs accepted by some groups which perceive them as benefiting only immigrant children. Based on my own experience, I can say with confidence that such programs, if well-planned, benefit a wide range of students. Had my friends, for example, been exposed to the Chinese language in elementary school, they would have saved years of time trying to master a language which is spoken by a quarter of the world's population. The difficulty of learning a new language stymies most adult learners who have to struggle against, among other things, the shock to the ego involved in speaking like a small child at age 20. Even more significant is the linguistic and cultural

awareness that language students accrue which not only helps prepare them to work and live more comfortably in an increasingly multicultural and multiracial society, but also leads to increased job opportunities in Ontario and abroad.

I'm certainly not alone in my conviction that an exposure to international languages in elementary school classrooms constitutes an important part of a forward-looking, up-to-date educational system. Recently, ten people, including myself, were brought together to form an advisory group to the Minister of Education and Training to recommend ways to improve the program province-wide. It was a remarkably positive experience for me to work together with these dedicated community and academic leaders, all of whom are deeply concerned with language learning. Thanks to their willingness to volunteer their time and energy, we were able to complete a report with ten recommendations, the first of which was to change the name of the program from heritage language to international languages: elementary. This report has been submitted to the Royal Commission on Learning where I

hope it will get the serious consideration it deserves. It is my hope that all Ontario students will be permitted to benefit from a well-planned, well-run international language program from Grade 1 to OAC and that the program will benefit Ontario's status as a truly dynamic and resourceful multicultural society. **ET**



Tam Goossen, Trustee,  
Toronto Board of Education