

Extraordinary Meeting

Notes on Bilingual Education at FPS.

Prepared by Hoang Tran Nguyen, FPS School Council Parent Member

The Member wishes to extend their respect to Elders both past and present of the Kulin Nation and acknowledges this document was prepared on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people.

Note: The Member is of Vietnamese heritage and is the Co-ordinator of the Bilingual Subcommittee (established late 2019).

14 April 2020

Introduction

One of the legislated objectives of School Council (SC) is to make decisions in the 'best interest of students' (Education and Training Act 2006). However, the 2018 Victorian Auditor-General's Report on School Council in Government Schools (VAG Report) found a lack of specific guidance on these objectives and 'how they are intended to apply in practice. Without guidance, school council members and principals can and do interpret each legislative objective differently, making it difficult to reach decisions and resolve disputes' (VAG 2018, p.9). For the purposes of this document the 'best interest of students' is defined by this Member as:

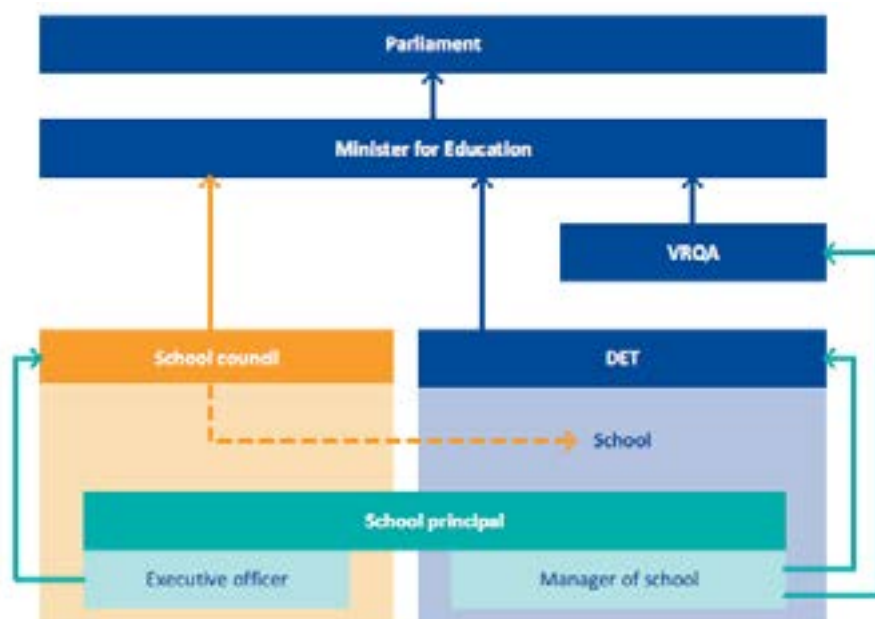
- Assisting in an operationally viable school
- Foster community understanding and support of a significant educational, cultural and historical asset of the school in Bilingual Education

Part One of this document elaborates on the first aspect whilst **Part Two** discusses the latter. As this Member views the two definitions as not mutually exclusive, **Part Three** considers closing arguments.

Independence

A second relevant finding of the VAG Report relates to the multi-layered governance structure of government schools (Fig.1). Although SC is accountable directly to the Minister, the Principal is employed by DET, who assigns regional officers to provide support to the principal in their day-to-day work. However, 'DET's guidance does not explain the avenues through which school council can seek advice independently of the principal when a dispute arises between them' (VAG 2018 p.9).

Figure 1 Victorian government school governance framework



Note: Solid lines represent accountability; dotted lines represent responsibility. Source: VAGO

An example of how the above can impact this discussion relates to the Melbourne Graduate School of Education Analysis of Designated Bilingual Programs in Victorian Government Schools: Footscray Primary School (MGSE Report), released to SC March 13. Not all SC members were adequately satisfied to fully endorse its recommendations at a recent SC Meeting (March 18). However, since the release of the MGSE Report, the previously arranged research work of the Bilingual Subcommittee in Bilingual Education (BE) has been significantly curtailed. Although the reasons for this are both related and unrelated to the release of the MGSE Report, it does demonstrate the potential difficulty when there is disagreement between staff and non-staff Members.

Although amendments to DET's Improving School Governance document has been released since the VAG Report, this Member has only been updated on its availability last week. On glance reading, the issues mentioned appear unaddressed.

The Member wishes to express good faith and potential collegiality in the following discussions.

Part One

Regarding the operational viability of FPS in delivering BE, aspects of staff recruitment, the role of Leadership and governance mechanisms are explored.

Recruitment and Retention

Since 2016 the ability to recruit Second Language teachers at FPS has been an oft cited challenge¹. Leaving aside this commonality amongst all Bilingual Schools, what is not acknowledged as much is teacher retention, or lack of in the case of FPS. For example, Lalor North are a fully staffed Bilingual school offering streams with similarly low numbers of Second Language teachers. Lalor North have a staff roster of many long-term employees.

Despite the low numbers of Vietnamese language teachers, when compared to other languages registered with DET, since 2016 FPS has recruited a total of eight (Fig.2). However, the School also lost eight teachers by the end of 2019 (Fig.1).

Figure 2 Second Language staff numbers at FPS

	Second Language staff	New to FPS	Left FPS by EOY
2016	5	1	2
2017	7	4	
2018	7		4
2019	4	1	2
2020	4	2	

*Note: This data is sourced from independent canvassing and input from past FPS staff. The Member understands there were no recruitment efforts during 2017.

Whilst it should be acknowledged that LOTE teachers represent just one potential source of hiring, successful Bilingual Schools also maintain a stable teacher roster. Although a number of past Second Language staff made submissions as part of the Independent Review at FPS in 2019, the potential insights regarding staff support and retention of that review are unavailable. However, two of those submissions were made available to this member². These accounts are first-hand experiences of working at FPS under the previous Leadership.

It has been suggested elsewhere that the quality of Second Language teachers at FPS in recent years may have been of insufficient quality. It has also been cited that only quality applicants were hired. Importantly, for this Member, what is not adequately investigated is professional support, job security and incentives to retain staff. On its own, the loss of eight Second Language teachers in four years would be difficult for any Bilingual School, regardless of language.

¹ The MGSE Report also makes much of this, to which this Member has prepared an analysis and previously circulated to SC and attached in the Appendix.

² These submissions were made available to this Member and are attached in the Appendix.

Hypothetically, if FPS had adopted a 50/50 model beginning from Foundation in 2017, as now proposed for 2021, an average of one to two Second Language teachers would need to be hired each year. If the number of students who complete a VCE Unit 4 Language is an indicator of potential future source of Second Language teachers, then Vietnamese factors similar to other more commonly taught languages (Fig.3).

Figure 3 VCE Unit 4 completions (DET 2014-2018)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Italian	229	242	255	250	236
Japanese	481	492	536	530	543
Vietnamese	307	320	224	330	409

At FPS some recent Vietnamese language teachers recruit sources at FPS include ‘Native’ speaking International Students who began high school studies in Australia. However, in reality, Bilingual recruitment takes many forms, including working with community networks, foreign consulates, past staff and early identification of undergraduate students. It is unclear to what extent FPS recruitment efforts have included, but, as an example, a representative from the Vietnamese Teachers Association of Victoria has reported to this Member that FPS has not been in touch with the Association in recent years.

CRT

It has been cited that FPS needed to replace Vietnamese teachers eleven times this year, with only one instance of success. This needs to be seen in context. Beginning of 2020 Term 1, FPS had four Vietnamese language teachers. By mid-term, two of these teachers took a simultaneous ten-week extended leave. One part-time teacher transitioned to full-time to help alleviate the gaps. During this period this teacher also participated in school visits as part of the Bilingual Subcommittee’s research efforts. It is arguable that two staff taking extended leave of this length is a common occurrence. However, there was a level of flexibility with another teacher to assist in this unusual situation.

Bilingual Schools can develop strategies in place regarding CRT’s, plan for these situations as well as develop networks of potential replacements. For example, Camberwell PS has developed a network of potential CRT’s. As part of a systemic approach to ensure classrooms can carry on, the School also plans in advance for aspects such as staggering Year level planning and meetings. Admittedly though, this Member has insufficient data from other Bilingual Schools to shed light into other ways to mitigate this challenge. It is unclear if a multi-level approach to CRT’s are in place at FPS, especially given the multiple Leadership transitions since mid-2019. Although this Member is not aware of such strategies or passing-on of knowledge, if current Leadership is only working with a CRT Agency this may suggest other avenues are not currently known to be available.

Moreover, if by 2027 FPS delivered 50% of curriculum in the Second Language and had approximately 10 teachers for each language stream, it would be highly unlikely that Leadership would approve of five Second Language teachers taking an extended ten-week leave concurrently. Staggered leave allowances would be more suitable here. However, a fully staffed Bilingual School in 2027 will have had seven years to develop strategies, including a possible CRT database.

Leadership

A consideration of Leadership at FPS in recent years seeks to unpack this aspect in contributing to 'stack the odds' in the School's favour;

- A 2017 SC Parent Member who participated in workshopping the School's Strategic Plan reported to this Member their surprise and disappointment that significant discussions around Bilingual Education (BE) did not appear to translate into the final document (FPS 2018-2021 Strategic Plan). This was reported to be a significant oversight in the context of the School's recent and existing challenges. When asked why the document was ultimately approved, the Parent Member indicated they understood they 'had no choice'. Other SC Members from 2017-2019 have also relayed to this Member misgivings relating to their participation in SC. In late 2018, the Department announced an independent review of the operations of School Council. The findings of this review are yet to be made available to the school.
- From 2011 to mid-2019 FPS had a Leadership change in the role of Assistant Principal (Acting) beginning 2018 (AAP). This AAP had specialised training in PYP Inquiry and was the lead author of the draft 2018 FPS Language Policy. When this draft policy was presented to the Education Subcommittee, Parent Members of the Subcommittee raised concerns over its significant downplaying of the role of BE at FPS, compared to the policy it sought to replace (2016 FPS Language Policy). The reason provided being, as the model of BE at FPS was in regular flux, the policy needed to be minimally general in order to allow for flexibility. Whilst this reasoning could be interpreted as a practical short-term response to the challenges the school was facing, as a policy document it represented a lack of vision and understanding of the role of language in the context of a Bilingual School. The draft document's list of references further suggests a familiarity to PYP Inquiry whilst no references are provided relating to Bilingual Education. As of writing, the policy remains in draft form.
- In 2016 the Literacy Coordinator also had a Leadership role. Past FPS Staff have reported that this Leader advised the then Principal that BE was causing a decline in literacy standards at the School. Although this is anecdotal information, it may help explain why Leadership opted to begin BE at FPS from Year 2 for 2017. A related Survey by the school outlines the reason for this as to allow Foundation and Year 1 students to 'develop strong foundations in English and Numeracy to set the children up for success for their primary years' (2016 FPS Bilingual Survey). Established research on BE

advises starting in the earliest formative levels of schooling, as commonly practiced across Bilingual Schools in Victoria. FPS parents were ignored when they questioned Leadership as to why the School was beginning BE at Year 2³. In subsequent years the lack of proficiency was often cited as one of the difficulties of BE at FPS.

- As well as making a problematic linking of English with literacy, this reasoning also appears to be contrary to research that pairs BE with advanced literacy skills in the long term compared with students in a monolingual learning environment.
- Despite its many challenges regarding BE, FPS Leadership stopped participating in Bilingual Principal's Network in recent years. This flowed down to Second Language teachers also not participating in a similar network.

Governance Mechanisms

It is said that each Bilingual School operates according to its own context, developing governance and best practice scenarios that can include;

- Bilingual policies or frameworks
- Strategic Planning specific to a Bilingual context
- School Council and Subcommittee membership with 'bilingual' members
- English language teachers receiving Bilingual induction or training
- Leadership and teachers participating in Bilingual related networks
- School Council understanding of Bilingual funding arrangement
- Assessment of BE delivery and effectiveness
- Second Language teacher in Leadership role

To this Member's knowledge, little of the above has featured at FPS in recent years. The case of the Language Policy is one example of an approach by previous Leadership.

Community Support

Given the accepted challenges, many BE School's engage and rely much on community support. An example of this is Lalor North PS, whose long-term classroom and support teaching aide staff work closely with, or are also members of, the communities associated with the Second Language.

Summary

Whilst it is valid to view Leadership as only one aspect of a functioning school, it should also not be understated how critical this aspect is. For this Member, the above examples regarding Leadership give a broad range of instances where, taken as a whole, FPS was not in the best possible position to successfully deliver BE. The above suggests that the operational viability of the school was significantly compromised in recent years.

³ One parent document presented to Leadership and the Senior Education Improvement Leader at the time was made available to this Member and is attached in the Appendix.

Part Two

Contemporary Australia is said to have a monolingual mindset⁴. In linguistic terms English is the 'hypercentral language that holds the entire world language system together'⁵. Prior to colonisation more than 250 Indigenous language were spoken in Australia. Of these only 13 languages are acquired by children today⁶. One of the earliest instances of language tensions in colonial Australia is the 1793 instance of two Irishmen sentenced to 300 lashes based on the single deposition from an illiterate prisoner:

"From what she saw of the Irishmen being in small parties in the camp of Toongabbie, and by their walking about together and talking very earnestly in Irish, deponent verily believes they were intent on something improper."

Quoted from *The Fatal Shore*, p.188⁷

Vietnamese at FPS

The Vietnamese language was introduced into the teaching environment at FPS as a Mother Tongue maintenance program in 1985, due to a high percentage of school population of Vietnamese heritage. BE is rare in Australia, and considering the above, it is a small wonder Vietnamese BE exists. With the exception of Lalor North PS (and Richmond West PS to a smaller extent) other Victorian State Schools deliver BE in a 'prestige language', another linguistic term.

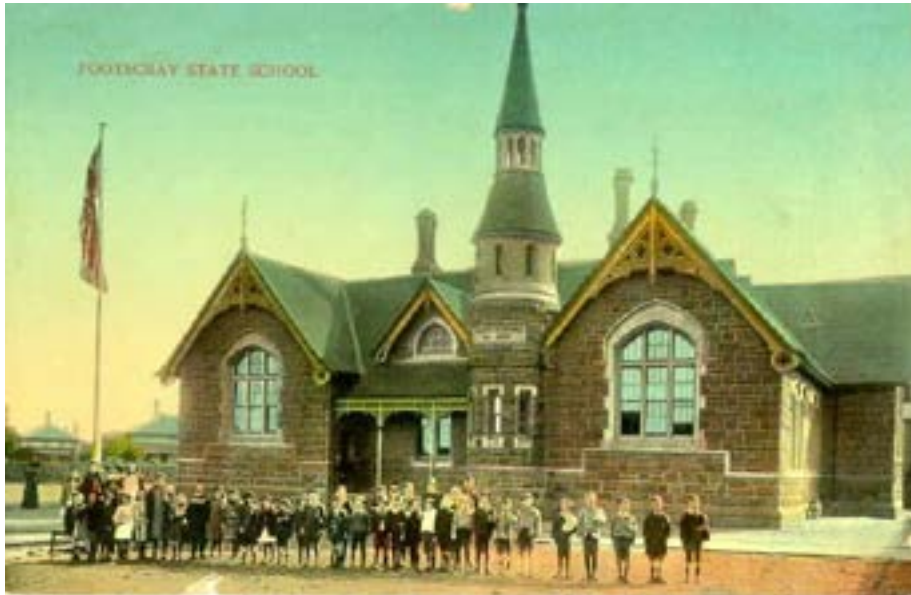
Recent gentrification has brought about changes in demographics as well as student numbers. To this Member, Vietnamese BE at FPS is seen as an opportunity to live in a Multicultural Australia that is much more than a 'meal of soup'. This is not to say that Vietnamese is the only minority culture that should be given precedence over others, rather it is to say that the recent identity of FPS and Melbourne's Western Suburbs is greatly linked to its recent migrant history. As example of this is the newly established Vietnamese Museum, to be built in Footscray by 2023 with significant Federal, State, Local Government and Community support.

⁴ Clyne, Michael (2005). *Australia's Language Potential* UNSW Press

⁵ De Swann, Abram (2001). *Words of the World: The Global Language System* Cambridge: Polity Press and Blackwell

⁶ <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/indigenous-australian-languages> Accessed 14/04/20

⁷ Hughes, Robert (1986). *The Fatal Shore* Vintage Books



Another way of thinking about the above is the question:

'When does language become history of place?'

FPS has a celebrated history regarding its heritage listed architecture, with its first Bluestone building constructed shortly after the School's opening in 1860¹². Despite the substantial challenges in maintaining safe and functioning spaces for education delivery within these buildings, it would be inconceivable to propose more efficient and purpose built spaces in their place. To be clear, this Member is not equating architecture with language. Rather, it is to demonstrate notions around value and what is deemed worthy of 'protecting' can be highly subjective and uneven.

It should be noted that notions of 'community' can encompass broad assumptions and cohort groupings. However, as demonstrated in 2016, Leadership's decision to discontinue BE at FPS resulted in broad community 'shock and distrust' in the process. Current Leadership plans to gradually inform the school community of the direction of BE. However, for this Member, it would be disingenuous of the SC to potentially decide to exclude Vietnamese as a Second Language consideration in the time proposed and argue that it has carried out consultation regarding this decision. The suggestion is also that, if FPS discontinues Vietnamese as the Second Language, the school can still continue to celebrate this aspect of its heritage. Whilst in one sense this may be true, in another it is like comparing LOTE to BE, they are entirely different approaches to pedagogy and cultural learnings.

The Bilingual Schools this Member has researched have all faced significant challenges in their history, Altona North PS included. Although it is not known whether a change in Second Language was explored, the foundation Second Language has remained.

¹² <https://vhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/places/502> Accessed 14/04/20

Part Three

The culmination of this meeting is a vote:

'To decide if we have enough evidence to warrant changing the target language to one of the most commonly taught languages.' - SC correspondence 07/04/20

It has been cited that the reason for the timing of this decision is to allow for adequate time regarding 2021 staffing recruitment. To this Member, excluding one language for consideration does not affect the School's ability to effectively perform this task. In fact, the process for consultation regarding the choice of Second Language is still to be discussed.

To be clear, this Member is not arguing that a change in Second Language curriculum delivery is not possible, or desirable, especially if there are valid operational challenges and interest in the community. Equally, this Member is arguing that if there are best practice mechanisms in place at FPS, successful Vietnamese BE is highly possible.

As argued in **Part One**, the operational viability of BE at FPS in recent years has been greatly impacted by Leadership in a broad range of aspects, beyond one individual. Whilst it should be noted that the number of available teachers for the current Second Language is considerably lower compared to other commonly taught languages, this Member argues that this is not the only factor that should determine whether a language is included for consideration. If Lalor North PS is an example, effective leadership to foster community support, greater pro-activeness within School governance bodies and clear strategic planning are also critical factors of success. As a whole **Part One** argues that the conditions were not favourable for FPS to successfully deliver BE. However, when considering the School's ability to hire eight staff in recent years as well as the broad community support that still exists for BE at FPS, this Member suggests that, under the right circumstances, FPS could successfully deliver BE with Vietnamese as the Second Language.

Part Two examines the 'cultural asset' aspect of the discussion. Many Bilingual Schools' Second Language relate directly to the local community and history. The importance of this should not be discounted lightly. For this Member this 'cultural asset' is what gives BE its added meaning, makes it worthwhile, so-to-speak.

As there are no demonstrated impacts of the School's ability to recruit for 2021 by excluding the current Second Language, this Member recommends including Vietnamese in the languages for consultation.

The arguments presented have been made in good will and to this Member's best understanding of what it means to consider the best interests of students. It is hoped that this can contribute to a positive way forward for the School.

References

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