

Hands up for a better Asian language plan

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Asian language teaching in Australian schools has declined to the point where more year 12 students are studying Latin than Chinese.

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Despite China's growing importance and the Gillard government's goal of creating an "Asia Literate" society by 2025, fewer high school students who don't speak Chinese at home are learning the language than four years ago.

Jane Orton, director of the Chinese Teacher Training Centre at the University of Melbourne, said: "After six years of bits and pieces, half an hour a week, they have no way of remembering the language, let alone mastering it, so the majority decide when leaving primary school that they're not going to go on learning."

Experts say the problem stems from badly structured programs and incentives rather than a lack of student interest or teacher capabilities, as demonstrated by the achievement of some schools to create bilingual programs despite little support.

At Richmond West Primary School children spend about half their week learning in Chinese and students are "genuinely bilingual", according to Australia's Chinese-speaking ambassador to China, Frances Adamson, speaking after she visited the school in November.

The school's acting principal, Lloyd Mitchell, said there had been a groundswell of interest from families of all backgrounds and yet his Year 6 students face the "ludicrous" situation of having no high school that can accommodate them.

"You've got the government talking about the Asian Century white paper, but doing nothing," he said.

At high school level, numbers of non-native-speaking Chinese language students have declined since the Howard and Rudd governments, largely because they are forced to compete against native-speakers in tertiary entrance exams, experts say.

Dr Orton, who is the author of Australia's only comprehensive report on Chinese language education, said: "There are actually fewer classroom learners of Chinese, who don't speak Chinese at home, taking Chinese at senior levels than there were four years ago."

At year 12, the number in Victoria has shrunk to about 150 compared with more than 200 studying Latin, she said, adding that Victoria had the most successful program in the country.

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