



Photo Cole Bennetts

Children learn Mandarin language at the Chinese Australian Early Childhood Centre in Mawson.

## Chinese bilingual childcare centre proposed for north-side

A Chinese bilingual childcare centre is being proposed for Canberra's northern suburbs. The Association for Learning Mandarin in Australia Inc (ALMA), which runs the Chinese Australian Early Childhood Centre in Mawson, has been in talks with the University of Canberra about building a second centre.

ALMA president Dr Ian Maclean said the organisation approached UC about two years ago about the possibility of a north-side centre being located on the campus. 'We'd be looking at something in the next year or so if everything goes smoothly,' he said. ALMA has been running the bilingual childcare centre in

Mawson since 1984 after it was established by a group of parents who thought it would be a good idea to teach their children a language other than English. 'They decided to go for a language that is quite different from English because it would have the biggest advantage for children and landed on Mandarin,' Dr Maclean said. 'Children are most receptive to foreign language learning when very young, and bilingual centres such as this give them a valuable head-start in their future lives and careers. 'We've been full or very close to it for a very long time. We have quite a few people who come to us from long distances including out of Canberra.'

The childcare centre in Mawson seeks to promote Chinese language and culture in the community as well as promoting the advantages of bilingual education. Studies from the USA and

Canada show that early intensive exposure to foreign languages provides significant cognitive benefits for children and supports the development of their language and literacy skills in English. 'The children end up being bilingual at a very young age,' Dr Maclean said. 'Firstly they absorb language like sponges but also they are not in the least bit frightened to have a go. They get in there with great enthusiasm.'

On Saturday 28 May a new extension to the Mawson centre was officially opened. Its construction was funded by a \$150,000 grant from the ACT Government, and furnished with funds raised by ALMA.

In addition to the childcare centre, ALMA also runs a program which matches people who want to learn English with those who want to learn Mandarin, as well as advocating to government in regards to language curriculum.