

Bilingual proposal

By Meredith Clisby

A GOVERNMENT backbencher has called for the establishment of more bilingual programs in the territory.

Member for Ginninderra Mary Porter has successfully passed a motion in the Legislative Assembly calling for the government to investigate the viability of developing such programs.

Ms Porter said a Mandarin-English or Japanese-English school would be her preference given the sister-city relationship already in place and the further business and career opportunities with Australia's biggest trading partners.

She said Canberra already had some excellent bilingual schools, such as Telopea Park, and she would like to see their success repeated.

"These programs are a way of immersing children in a language rather than just giving children a couple of hours here and there," she said.

"A couple of hours a week in the course of your other studies, just to introduce you to a language or culture, really does just that."

Ms Porter said developing language proficiency, a level only just inferior to a native speaker, took between 800 hours for European languages and 2600 hours for complicated Asian languages or

Arabic. She said this was much easier when a child was immersed in the language and they also received greater benefits in other areas.

"I think this is a great opportunity because it's not only good for the children to have this skill when they leave school, it also builds their confidence and helps them concentrate," Ms Porter said.

The Member for Ginninderra said she hoped the idea could be part of the debate on improving public high schools and colleges.

A discussion paper on this issue was released by Minister for Education Andrew Barr in August.

Ms Porter said while it was still early days, such a program would need to be jointly funded by the ACT Government and the particular county.

"I think that first of all we've got to explore whether or not there's going to be the possibility of any funding coming forth and whether the government is willing to put money aside in its budget for even the scoping of this idea in the first instance," she said.

Ms Porter said the program could be implemented in an already established school, as Telopea Park did in 1984, or it could be brought online in one of the territory's future schools.



Mary Porter, pictured with student Joshan Ramadani, would like to see more bilingual programs run in Canberra, like the one at Telopea Park. Picture: Elesa Lee