

Bilingual education for northside

By Meredith Clisby

THE Association for Learning Mandarin in Australia (ALMA) has called for more recognition for early childhood bilingual programs.

ALMA, a not-for-profit community-based organisation, has run the bilingual child care program located at Mawson Primary School for the last 25 years.

The association contacted *The Chronicle* after reading an article in last week's edition about the ACT Government's support for bilingual education.

ALMA hope to open a second centre at the University of Canberra but do not have access to funding arrangements offered to other educational institutions.

President Ian Maclean said there was currently an education policy gap when it came to the learning of languages.

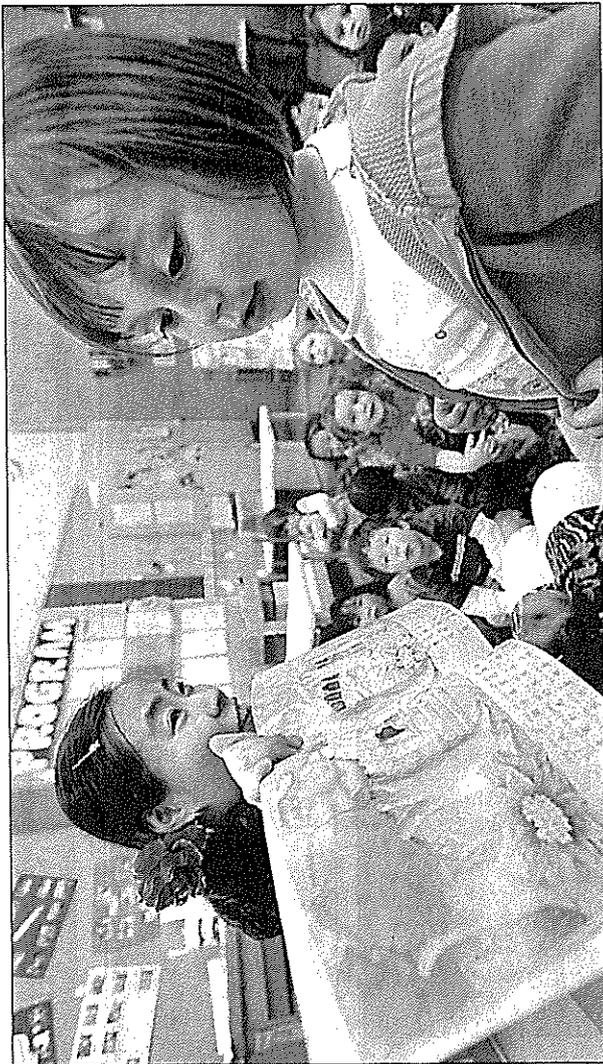
"In Australia our language learning arrangements are such that we don't actually teach people languages [in early childhood], by and large what happens is they get introduced after the age of eight, and usually at high school," he said.

"The ACT Government to its great credit has established a system whereby some language learning will take place in grades 3 to 8 in all government schools from next year, but the reality is that the best time to learn is when you're very young."

He said it was encouraging that child care was now called early childhood education and care, but there was still a long way to go.

"What we think we're doing is actually part of that education - but the education component actually hasn't melded at all with the education system in schools," he said.

"What we believe should happen is if we have language learning arrangements with families who want them, and then articulate that from child care through to primary school and then to high school and college - we would



Bilingual teacher Yong Mei at ALMA child care centre with Molly McNeil. ALMA hope to start a centre on the northside to cater for families who want to start their child's bilingual education from an early age. Picture: Elesa Lee

have a relatively inexpensive language learning process."

Mr Maclean said the positive relationship between ALMA and Mawson Primary School showed what could be achieved when languages were introduced at an early age.

All students from Kindergarten to Year 2 learn Mandarin, and are then given an option to enter the Mandarin intensive program from Year 3. Students spend two days a week with a Mandarin teacher and three with an English teacher.

He said the first cohort of students from the intensive program had reached the top of feeder school Melrose High in 2007. The students named dux of the school for the years 2007, 2008 and 2009 had come from this Mandarin intensive program.

"To have three duxes out of three from such a very tiny group is just an absolutely astonishing result and I'm just amazed that the groups were so small, it's just an incredibly impressive result," he said.

Mr Maclean said the association hoped to establish a second centre at the University of Canberra to cater for northside families who wanted to provide their children with bilingual education.

A spokeswoman from the university confirmed they had reached an agreement with ALMA on their proposal.

"If ALMA can raise the funds needed to build the centre then the university will offer them a lease," she said.

"We are supportive of expanding child care options on campus and adding a new bilingual child care centre, which we believe will complement our existing child care facilities on campus."

Mr Maclean said the back-of-the-envelope calculation of the building would be about \$3 million.

"We're endeavouring to pursue a variety of options, it's proceeding more slowly than I would like but we're not very used to holding out our hand," he said.

Mr Maclean said he had approached the ACT Government but the response had not been positive.

"It would be nice if they could [help with funding] and I'm ever hopeful that they will and we'll be writing letters to them and things of that nature," he said.

"There are things that governments can do that are not necessarily handing over the cash - they can indicate support and indicate that it's consistent with their overall plans."