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Former finance minister Manley urges debate on new language skills

By BILL CURRY and SEAN SILCOFF

Urges parents to enrol children in Asian language classes to prepare them for a multilingual workforce

The voice of Canada's CEOs is urging parents to enroll their kids in Asian language classes to match them with the growing appetite of employers for multilingual workers.

John Manley, the former finance minister who now heads the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, said it is time for a national debate over how to encourage new language skills as part of the country's trade efforts.

At the national level, the Conservative government is making an aggressive push to expand trade with China, India and Latin America, but Ottawa has no say in provincial curriculum or local school-board policies.

Even parents who can afford private language lessons can have a hard time finding classes for their kids, Mr. Manley said.

"It has to do with where the jobs are going to be 10, 15, 20 years from now. I think that it's a great asset for Canada that we already think in terms of bilingualism. I just think that we are underestimating the importance of multilingualism," said Mr. Manley, after delivering a speech to the Canadian Club of Ottawa about the need for Canadians and Canadian businesses to focus more on Asia.

"We know that we have members that are trying to hire – particularly Mandarin speakers – but other languages as well, and they're not easy to find," he said.

The Canadian Council of Chief Executives represents the CEOs of 150 of Canada's biggest companies.

Canada should follow Australia's lead, said Mr. Manley, where government policy encouraged Chinese language education in schools. A report released last month by the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada made a similar recommendation, pointing to how Australia's sustained focus on China takes a broader approach than simply signing trade deals.

It is up to individual school boards to decide policies around language courses, and some are already pushing hard in this area. For instance, the Calgary Board of Education offers Mandarin as an "alternative program" that can be accessed for an additional fee. The Calgary board also offers programs in French, German and Spanish.

The Calgary Herald reported earlier this year that the school board is aggressively hunting for language expertise, sending two recruiters to Madrid in April in an effort to find more Spanish teachers.

In Brampton and Mississauga, the Peel District School Board has elementary-level courses available in more than a dozen languages, including Arabic, Bulgarian, Cantonese, Gujarati, Hindi, Mandarin, Punjabi, Sinhalese, Spanish, Tamil, Urdu and Vietnamese.

It's not only big-city school boards that are moving in this direction. Earlier this year, the Renfrew County District School Board announced it would offer Mandarin to 24 adult education students in the small Ontario town of Deep River.

The B.C. government considered taking a step further with a draft curriculum that would have treated French as an "additional language" that would be grouped with others like German and Mandarin. That plan was abandoned last year in the face of objections from supporters of French language education.


Next month, Statistics Canada will release the 2011 census data on language. The previous census, taken in 2006, found that 2.8 million Canadians used more than one language at work.

After English and French, Chinese was the third most used language at work, followed by Italian, German and Punjabi.

Regardless of the approach, Mr. Manley said there needs to be more discussion and planning around encouraging Canadian kids to learn more than just English and French.

"We're not making it a value in terms of what we're trying to equip our young people to do," he said.

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