

## **The Role and Significance of the International Languages**

### **Program In Modern Soceity and a Post-Covid World**

My name is Alexander Roman. By way of some personal background, I am a proud graduate of St Michael's College School, the class of '74. I hold a doctorate in the sociology of Canadian multiculturalism and the transmission of ethnic identity and values within our society.

I've worked at Queen's Park until my recent retirement for about thirty years in policy and related areas as a senior researcher dealing with Ontario MPP's, and as EA to the Ontario Speaker.

I've developed a number of private member's bills promoting the varied heritage of the Canadian cultural mosaic including: United Empire Loyalists Day, General Sir Isaac Brock Day, Irish Heritage Day, Scottish Tartan Day and the Ontario Tartan, Giovanni Caboto Day and Italian Heritage Month, Portuguese Heritage Day, German Pioneer Day, Samuel de Champlain Day and Month, Holocaust Memorial Day and Pope John Paul II Day. I developed these bills with and for the Ontario Progressive Conservative Caucus, and they received enthusiastic all-party support in the Legislature when they were passed into provincial law.

Today, I'm privileged to speak to you on why the Catholic School Board's International Language Program is both integrally important and critically relevant to the aims and goals of the Ontario Ministry of Education's Core Curriculum – and this on several levels.

Language itself is not only a part of culture, it is truly the culture itself and its highest expression. Language enlivens culture by means of literature, records its memory via history, and develops its necessary symbolic and material content through a constant process of evolution. It is language that connects a member with others on the basis of shared spirituality and values, confirms one's personal and group identity within it and allows these to be shared with people of other cultures, indeed with the entire world.

Language encapsulates ideas at their most abstract level and allows for the ongoing development of society as its norms, values and mores are constantly handed down to succeeding generations. This is especially achieved via our educational institutions. To learn a language is to, at one and the same time, open an educational mosaic which allows us to understand and empathize with the people and community that are based upon the medium of that same language. As one writer put it, if one may capture the spirit of any given culture, language is its life-blood.

I would like to advance the argument that the role of education is not only about teaching what to think. It is even more salient to see that role as teaching us HOW to think and think critically.

At its deepest level, education is ultimately about understanding MEANING via the socially-constructed interpretive paradigms by which we perceive the world around us. This is, at one and the same time, the precise role and purpose of language as the medium of communicating understanding and meaning.

One could say then why not focus solely on the mainstream languages of Canadian society? Why the teaching of heritage and international languages?

One reason has to do with the false although widely popular psychological notion that the study of other languages weakens our understanding of the mainstream language, in this case, English. In fact, the International Languages program strengthens and deepens precisely our knowledge of English within the comparative framework of heightened grammatical and idiomatic usages as we learn them in other linguistic usages.

At the same time, the study of the language of our particular heritage, including a more precise study of the rich panoply of the English language itself, provides us with a deeper appreciation of our own personal background and history, reaffirms our connectedness to a defined identity and cultural community, and helps us understand the wide range of spiritual and cultural values that identification with a culture affords us.

It provides personal and fulfilling meaning for our lives, a sense of security and predictability in terms of belongingness to a group with shared meanings and symbolic gratification on which to base a healthy personal and family life, together with a spiritual foundation that will keep us in good stead throughout the vicissitudes, uncertainties and calamities of life, including the present great upheaval of the Covid-19 crisis.

Language, like religion and culture, is all about meaning, its discovery and its communication. Languages teach us to understand what it means to be a Canadian citizen, what it means to live as a citizen in a cultural mosaic and how to relate to citizens with other cultural backgrounds and ways of life. International languages are ideally suited for connecting us not only to our own cultural communities, but also to those of many others. By understanding the cultural system of more than one language and the culture it encapsulates, we gain the competence to understand so many others.

And by means of the languages we choose to learn, whether they are those of our own personal heritage or others, we are inducted into an understanding of the entire family of languages to which they are related, be they other Romance languages, Slavic languages or others.

And what does it mean to be a citizen of the global economy today? Technological advances have made the world shrink and have created the circumstances whereby North Americans, so used to one mainstream English language, are thrust into the multilingual world of international trade and commerce. The future economic development of Canada, and especially in a post-Covid marketplace, will largely depend on Canadian students, our future professionals and business leaders, and their ability to reach across linguistic lines while demonstrating respect and understanding of many other cultures while showing empathy for peoples of different socio-political contexts. Only the International Languages program can equip them with the necessary skills to achieve that.

If the Core Curriculum of Ontario's education system does not provide the breadth of vision, the deeper levels of social, cultural and political understanding of the world around us – and I don't believe that for a minute - together with the cultural diversity of the mosaic which IS Canada, then it is that Curriculum which needs

tweaking – NOT the International Languages Program. Let us not make the mistakes of the American educational system in this respect.

I would like to thank the Director of Education and the honoured Members of the Committee for allowing me this opportunity to express my views on this important matter.

Respectfully Submitted by:

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