

Academics urge government to heed indigenous language report

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A group of indigenous language researchers from the University of Melbourne is calling on the Federal Government to implement a proposal to introduce bilingual teaching programs in some schools.

The proposal was one of 30 recommendations made last week by a Federal Parliamentary inquiry into [language](#) learning in indigenous communities.

Professor Gillian Wigglesworth, the Director of the University's Indigenous Language Research Unit, said bilingual education was vital to the development of young children in communities where languages other than English were spoken at home.

"Without a bilingual program, children are being taught in a language they are not familiar with. This means they often don't understand what is going on, and then don't engage," she said.

According to the *Our Land Our Language* report—tabled in Federal Parliament by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs—teaching children in their first language in preschool (before gradually increasing the amount of English used in the classroom) resulted in higher literacy rates by Year 7 in English and the first language.

"We know from many studies both here and internationally, that teaching children using their first language is the best way for them to

learn anything, including a second language," Professor Wigglesworth said.

"Children come to school with a lot of knowledge about language – their first language – and we need to build on this knowledge." The report recommended several other measures to slow the loss of indigenous languages and improve educational outcomes for indigenous people in remote areas.

These included constitutional recognition of indigenous languages, support for interpreter services (especially in the health and justice sectors) and ways of ensuring that Australia's linguistic heritage is protected into the future, by supporting regional language centres and archives.

Professor Wigglesworth is optimistic the report will have an impact.

"Hopefully now that this report has been tabled, various governments will see that the weight of evidence supports measures such as bilingual education, appropriate language and cultural training for teachers working in indigenous communities and recognition of the contribution that indigenous teachers can make, as well as alternatives to NAPLAN testing that doesn't discriminate on the basis of a student's language.

"We have a real chance of improving the lives of the tens of thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for whom a one-size-fits-all education system has not been successful."

"But for that to happen, we need the governments to get behind the committee's findings and act immediately," she said.

More information: [www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary Business/Committees/Senate/Indigenous_languages2/report/full%20report.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Indigenous_languages2/report/full%20report.pdf)

Provided by University of Melbourne

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