

FUNDING CUT - GERMAN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS WORRIED ABOUT FUTURE

Interview by Theresa Kliem

German, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic - these are just some of the over 40 languages taught in more than 70 heritage language schools & organizations throughout the province under the umbrella of the Saskatchewan Organization for Heritage Languages Inc. (SOHL). Last winter, the Government of Saskatchewan announced their decision to stop providing funding to SOHL for heritage language learning due to the current economic situation in the province. This was a shock for many heritage language schools in Saskatchewan. Susanne Pachal, coordinator of the German Language School Saskatoon, Sabine Zagoricnik-Wecker, coordinator of DAS SCHULHAUS - Regina German Language School, and Ulrike Hecker, coordinator of the Hansel and Gretel Preschool in Saskatoon, talk about their worries and the importance of heritage language programs.

Postillion: After 25 years, the Ministry of Education announced that it will not renew SOHL's \$225,000 grant for heritage language learning in Saskatchewan. What consequences does this cut have for your preschool?

Ulrike Hecker: Our preschool is a five-day early childhood program that has been in place for more than 30 years. In order to maintain a high quality and unique bilingual preschool program, we have very specific requirements when hiring staff. Part of the funding provided by the government was used to cover wages for our qualified teachers and assistant teachers. The funding cut forces us to increase tuition, which is quite likely to result in decreased enrolment for the upcoming school years. Without full classes, there is a chance that we will be unable to cover the costs of operation for our preschool. We are still in the process of discussing options to cover the financial loss.

Postillion: Some people argue that newcomers to Canada should focus on learning English instead of sending their children to a heritage language school. Why are these schools important for Saskatchewan?

Sabine Zagoricnik-Wecker: I am more concerned about children losing their heritage language. It is of vital importance that both newly arrived newcomers as well as first and second generation immigrants can have access to their language of origin. This builds a bridge between cultures, roots people to their new country and provides a sense of community to those seeking a new life in a foreign land.

Susanne Pachal: The classes, programs and cultural events are about much more than just teaching students their native language. They also provide an opportunity to stay connected with their cultural roots. New immigrants often try to integrate into their new surroundings by learning the country's language and customs, which helps with the integration process, but sometimes also results in a disconnection from their language and heritage. A large amount of our students who have German grandparents or parents don't speak German at home, or they might understand the language but don't have the opportunity to read and write it. Heritage language schools provide a wonderful opportunity for these people to either continue practicing their language or ensure that newer generations will keep that link to their heritage alive.

Postillion: What is the focus of your language program?

Susanne Pachal: The focus of our school is teaching to write, understand and speak the language. We also provide credit classes for High School students and offer the DSD1 (German Language Certificate) preparation course and exam. This diploma can be very helpful for students who might consider studying at a college in Germany. However, we also teach and celebrate the cultural aspects of our heritage through fun and educational events throughout the school year. We encourage the general population to participate in these cultural events, which provide a wonderful opportunity for anyone in our city to learn about our language and traditions.

Postillion: Some people might think that mostly immigrants and their descendants benefit from Saskatchewan's heritage language schools. However, I know that not all of your students have a German-speaking background. Can you tell me why parents enroll their children at your English-German bilingual preschool?

Ulrike Hecker: While there are students who come from around the city specifically for the German component, we are equally a "neighbourhood preschool". The majority of our students are from surrounding areas and multiple ethnic backgrounds. All of them are benefitting from the inherent advantage of linguistic development.

Postillion: What disappoints you the most about the decision of the government?

Sabine Zagoricnik-Wecker: The biggest disappointment is that the Ministry of Education doesn't see language learning as their mandate. It seems like they label all the language schools as cultural after-school programs. Das Schulhaus, for example, offers language diplomas, which are accredited by the ZfA (Central Agency to the German Schools Abroad) as part of their educational program. It is also sad that the Ministry of Education can't see the potential they have at hand with the schools regarding international languages. The funding given was minimal at best but was still valued by the schools. It fundamentally supported a person's right to equal access to their language of origin. As a country that prides itself on multiculturalism, cutting such funding is counterintuitive.