

*Fieldhouse School, Greenbank Road, Rochdale, OL12 0HZ*

Dear Mr Blunkett,

NALDIC (National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum) is dedicated to promoting the learning and achievement of bilingual pupils in schools. As professionals who support children with English as an Additional Language in schools around Britain, we are concerned about your recently reported statement that parents should speak more English with their bilingual children at home.

In our work we are very aware of the need to support children's bilingual development. Research both nationally and internationally has shown that the most effective way to promote the achievement of bilingual children is for them to continue to develop their first languages alongside their learning of English. Whilst children are constantly exposed to English at school and in society as a whole and may often use English at home with siblings and parents, there are far fewer opportunities for them to use their mother tongue. It is therefore vital that parents continue to speak their first language with children at home and promote the development of their first language skills in other ways. As part of our work, we therefore recommend that parents continue to use their first languages in the home, and encourage their children to speak and study their mother tongue.

In the current climate of opinion, which is often hostile towards families from minority ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, any remarks concerning language use are likely to be interpreted negatively by the national and local press. For example, one of our members discovered that her local newspaper was holding an Internet vote on the question: 'Like David Blunkett, do you think Asian immigrants should be urged to speak English at home?'. This question would cause offence to British Asian readers and - through its wider implications - to readers from other ethnic minority backgrounds. It reinforces the sense of being surrounded by prejudice against bilingual and bicultural identities, which again research has shown to be a significant factor in terms of educational achievement.

In order to promote the learning and achievement of bilingual children in our schools we would urge you to speak out explicitly in favour of first language use in the home as well as supporting further educational initiatives to promote mother tongue classes in community language schools and in mainstream schools. Positive actions of this kind would be well-received by minority ethnic communities and would lead to children growing up as competent bilinguals, able to use their knowledge in an increasingly multilingual world - both for their own benefit and for that of the British economy. Such positive actions would also enhance children's self-esteem through confidence in their bilingual identity, enabling them to feel fully integrated into British society.

We do hope that you will feel able to take forward this kind of multilingual agenda in order to promote educational opportunity and social inclusion for all our children.

Yours sincerely

Ian Jones  
Chair of NALDIC