

# Bilingualism as a pathway to success

Students take classes in German and English at the Deutsche Schule, writes **Effie Mann**.

*Celebrating 15 years* of bilingual education feels like the realisation of a dream for Deutsche Schule Melbourne principal Jörg Dopfer.

"We started with 14 students and an ambitious, boundary-pushing idea, and now we have 180 kids, an established school and a wonderful community," says Dopfer of the German-English speaking primary school.

"The most amazing thing to me is that we are instilling in these students a gift that will serve them for life."

In Deutsche Schule Melbourne's unique bilingual approach, students take classes in both languages, meaning they solidify their learning through conversation and play, simultaneously improving their vocabulary and grammar.

Standing in front of a 400-strong crowd of community and friends who turned out to celebrate the anniversary, the school's captains likened their bilingual education to having a superpower. "It's also really cool," said one with a grin.

"We offer a unique and wonderful learning environment," Dopfer says. "Our school is registered with both the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) and with regulators in Germany to comply with the German curriculum requirements."

German education is focused on a sound foundation of core knowledge, Dopfer explains.

It guides students towards an understanding of the fundamental principles of each topic by encouraging them to question their understanding and critically examine the information they have been given to build a solid theoretical knowledge that can then be applied when solving problems.

"This contrasts with the Victorian curriculum's focus on the application of knowledge and how knowledge can be transferred across domains," Dopfer says. "Together, these two contrasting approaches complement and enrich each other."

In the school's foundation year, children learn 80 per cent in German and 20 per cent in English, before gradually progressing to 50:50 in years 5 and 6.

Even those who have no history of German – about one-third of



Above: Deutsche Schule Melbourne principal Jörg Dopfer and students.

Right: The students go from an 80:20 German-to-English split in the foundation year, to 50:50 in years 5 and 6.



enrolments and increasing – can pick up the language at staggering speed this way. A late-entry, accelerated pathway is available to children joining the school from year 1 onwards.

"By year 6, students are fluent in German," Dopfer says. "If they visited Berlin tomorrow, they would be able to order a meal, use public transport and make new friends, easily. And they would immediately be familiar with the central European culture."

Dopfer says the school serves as a gateway to opportunity and adventure for students and their families.

When interviewed by SBS Germany during last month's anniversary celebration, father-of-two Justin said he and his wife, who are both Australian-born, were inspired to enrol

their children at Deutsche Schule Melbourne because she had enjoyed a high school exchange in Germany.

"The chance to do something with a bilingual immersion program was really compelling because it's not easy to give your kids a language experience if you don't have an extra language in the house," Justin said.

The benefits of multilingualism are many. Research shows the "bilingual brain" is better equipped for multitasking, creativity and communication, and enhances problem-solving skills.

"Bilingualism sorts out the unnecessary information from the unnecessary because you are always trying to find the right words in the right language in your brain," Dopfer

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Jörg Dopfer

explains. "It is good training for facing all manner of life's challenges."

The school's mantra, Empowering Minds. Enriching Lives, is the guiding principle in Deutsche Schule Melbourne's new vision and mission statement, which were unveiled for the first time at the ceremony.

A labour of love for Dopfer and his colleagues, the statement took the team a year to collate, with considerable input from students, parents and teaching staff.

Speaking at the event, project overseer Leon Gabler said that the statement reflected the school's belief that bilingual education was not just about academics, but rather about nurturing open-minded, adaptable individuals ready to thrive in an ever-changing world.

The statement also outlined the importance of nurturing honesty, integrity and kindness, and genuine partnerships among parents, students, and teachers, to build meaningful and lasting connections.

As the students sang, acted and joked on stage, cake was cut and families mingled, the sense of community in Fitzroy was palpable.

"For us, it started with the bilingual nature of the school and a desire for them to grow up with both languages, but it's actually evolved into a lot more than that because as soon as we were here, the community is really what has kept us," said Honor, who is parent to two children at the school.

Dopfer agrees that it's not only what happens at school that feels special, but also what the children can then share with their families and friends. "One of the wonderful benefits of a bilingual community is what the students take home with them," he says.

As Deutsche Schule Melbourne grows, so too do the opportunities it offers Melburnian kids. Renovations are under way on additional buildings and facilities, and the school is accepting expressions of interest for secondary school, commencing 2026.

"The future, and the next 15 years, feel very bright," Dopfer says.



## OPEN DAY

Wednesday, 11 September 2024

9:30 AM – 11:30 AM

Are you interested in providing your children with a German-English bilingual education?

Then come along and join our next Open Day. Principal Jörg Dopfer will introduce our school's educational approach and current DSM students will give you a tour of our school. Speak to our friendly team while enjoying morning tea. Please register your interest via the DSM website or the QR code.



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