

Michael Embaie. President's Speech. SAHLA Symposium May 16, 2026

On behalf of SAHLA, I wish to welcome everyone to SAHLA's 2026 Symposium, "Languages Learning: Cultural Understanding, Community & Social Cohesion & Enhanced Career Opportunities.

Firstly, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the traditional territories of the Indigenous people of the Treaty 7 region. The City of Calgary is also home to Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III. SAHLA is a not-for profit education association based in Calgary whose mission is to lead, advocate and provide resources for the development and promotion of international/heritage languages education.

Since 1985, SAHLA continues to be the coordinating body of a diverse community of language schools across Calgary. SAHLA has grown over the years to represent 43 different international heritage language schools, with over 7,000 Alberta students. There are over 600 teachers and parent volunteers at SAHLA schools, with the support of tens of thousands of parents and volunteers from diverse ethno-cultural and linguistic communities. SAHLA works actively in partnership with Alberta Education, the Calgary Board of Education, the University of Calgary, the ethnocultural community and the community at large, all in support of the teaching of languages for Calgary students from kindergarten to high school.

SAHLA provides essential and unduplicated languages education coordination, teaching, learning and development; best practices in curriculum development and professional development for language instructors; teaching resource financial support for language schools; and our SAHLA Resource Centre and Coordinator.

SAHLA's vision is for every student to have access and opportunity to learn an international/heritage language in support of their basic education from kindergarten through high school.

SAHLA also works in support of Canada's Multiculturalism Act to strengthen diversity, inclusion, respect, peace and social cohesion.

SAHLA's 43 language schools are preparing our students and graduates to become lifelong learners, global citizens, multicultural ambassadors and multilingual leaders in our city, province and country.

Language and culture are inseparable. They are a true reflection of our Alberta and Canadian society's growing linguistic, cultural and racial diversity. Given this reality, the teaching and learning of languages by SAHLA's schools contributes towards creating a conducive, multilingual, multicultural environment that would help build a stronger, more respectful, peaceful and cohesive society for people of all backgrounds. These are assets we can all use to create a society that helps build civic participation, reduce systemic racism, build social and economic justice, enhanced career opportunities, international trade and cooperation.

The [Conference Board of Canada](#) research indicates that bilingualism and language knowledge are tangible assets in driving international trade and business growth.

Global Diversification: Language skills enable Canadian businesses to bypass communication barriers, build stronger international client relationships, and successfully diversify their global markets beyond the United States.

According to the Conference Board of Canada's Employability Skills Profile, Canadian employers need a person who has the academic skills and experience to communicate, understand, speak and write effectively in the languages and cultures in which business is conducted. Languages learning also helps a business leader or employee to listen and learn other cultural perspectives to think critically and act logically to evaluate situations, solve problems and make decisions.

Statistics Canada's 2021 National Census has shown, multilingualism and diversity continues to rise in Canada. One in four (9.2 million) Canadians had at least one mother tongue other than English or French, and one in eight (4.6 million) Canadians spoke predominantly a language other than English or French at home. In Canada, four in ten people could conduct a conversation in more than one language.

As seen in Canada's immigration statistics, almost one in four people (23.0%) counted during the 2021 Census are or have been a landed immigrant or permanent resident in Canada. Just over 1.3 million new immigrants settled permanently in Canada from 2016 to 2021.

Alberta Education has provincial programs of study in 8 international languages for high school, including Arabic, Chinese, German, Italian, Japanese, Punjabi, Spanish and Ukrainian. Alberta Education also offers two Indigenous languages, Blackfoot and Cree.

Twelve (12) of SAHLA's schools teach Alberta Education approved high school credit courses in the following seven (7) languages:

Arabic, Chinese (Mandarin), German, Greek, Italian, Polish and Swedish.

Over the last few years, SAHLA has been advocating at various forums, including our SAHLA Symposiums, the need for Alberta Education to sustainably fund SAHLA and our 43 language schools -- who still don't receive any direct government funding to help with their school operational costs, including classroom rental and instructors' honorarium.

SAHLA would like to take this opportunity to request Minister Demetrios Nicolaides and the Department of Education & Childcare to strongly support SAHLA and our language schools in the following two areas:

1) Affordable and accessible classroom rental space for students and teachers on weeknights and weekends to assist our schools with operational costs. Right now, 18 of our SAHLA language schools rent classroom space from Calgary Board of Education, which charges each school with the formula of \$77/hour for 7 classes + gym on weekends. This costs each of our schools thousands to tens of

thousands of dollars each year to rent public school space to teach language programs that already support and enhance public education and learning.

2) Honorarium for language instructors to assist schools with instructional costs. On average, language instructors teach 3 hours per week, or approximately 100 of instructional hours per year.

Therefore, SAHLA finds it imperative that the Government of Alberta reinstate a community-based language school grant in the amount of \$100 per student per year, or approximately \$700,000 per year which would provide our schools with the much-needed regular, predictable and sustainable funding required to help pay their overhead costs of classroom rental and instructor honorariums.

We strongly believe that these critical funding requests for languages learning are realistic, affordable and doable.

Therefore, we are asking the Minister of Education to address these two critical issues by introducing a sustainable operational funding grant for language schools. These funds will help make our SAHLA language schools stronger and more sustainable for many years.

We thank our SAHLA board members, our coordinator, school principals, teachers, students, parents and volunteers. We especially thank all of our SAHLA schools for your invaluable ongoing contribution of teaching young

Albertans to learn and communicate in international languages.

We look forward to continuing to work actively with all our SAHLA schools in strong partnership with Alberta Education, the University of Calgary and the Calgary Board of Education. To continue preparing our students to succeed in learning languages and become multilingual citizens and valued members of our workforce and global economy.

Let's continue to build Calgary, Alberta and Canada as a kind, welcoming, respectful and collaborative multicultural and multilingual city, province and country for all, for many generations to come.

Thank you.

Michael Embaie, President, SAHLA.