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Schools may axe Italian language

ITALIANS are angry with the Federal Government because they believe Asian languages are going to be given preference over Italian and Greek lessons at school.

The reaction follows Education Minister John Dawkins' announcement on September 26 of a major review of Australia's literacy and language policy.

Ethnic Affairs Commissioner Michael Cantali said the 4000-odd strong Italian community was jumping up and down because it could not get a commitment from the minister that Italian language funding would not be cut.

Female members of the Apia Soccer Club at Leichhardt have organised a petition which they plan to send to the Education Minister after they have gathered signatures across the country.

The petition says: "Mamma Lena and the Apia Club ladies committee indignantly protest the Government's intention of withdrawing Italian language from high schools while favoring Asian languages, German and French. These intentions are offensive."

by AMANDA PARK

Mamma Lena is considered a Mother Theresa in the inner west Italian community and is at the front of an army of women ready to defend the right for their native language to be taught in schools.

The women believe that a process has already begun to rid high schools of Italian classes.

But Mr Dawkins' media adviser Wayne Burns branded the Italians' reaction as "unmitigated hysteria".

"The Italians are whipping themselves into a lather before they know what is happening," Mr Burns said.

"It is ridiculous to assume Italian is going to be axed from schools when the discussion paper isn't even out yet."

Mr Burns said the idea of the review was to check language programs were serving individual, community and national needs.

A green discussion paper would be released before Christmas when people could comment and suggest

directions which would lead to the preparation of a white policy paper early next year.

The white paper would identify strategies for the Government's consideration in its budget.

Ladies committee members Mamma Lena and Rose Cantali are worried their society will become fragmented if Italian is not promoted and cultivated.

Mrs Cantali, a teacher and Italian lesson writer, has three children David, 11, Alexander, 7, and Laura, 1.

The two older children are bilingual but Mrs Cantali is worried about her youngest child's future.

"As children, a lot of my generation had hang ups after growing up being called wogs," Mrs Cantali said.

"We don't want a return of that or pockets of Greeks and Italians fighting each other," she said.

Mrs Cantali fears the discussion paper is a sham and an excuse for the Government to pander to Asian businessmen's desires rather than building a better-skilled workforce among Australians firmly established in the community.