

Topic 3 – Early Childhood Language Immersion Programs

Examples of success in providing early childhood language immersion programs

- Sharing information and best practices with other tribes, but then figuring out what works best in your own community/tribe.
- Connect with other community movements and initiatives, such as efforts to promote local naming of places and signage in Native languages.
- Re-creating philosophy of parents and grandparents as first teachers.
- Teach teachers non-verbal communication skills to aid them when they speak in a Native language and children don't understand, such as using dramatic acting (charades).
- Support speakers at whatever level they are at. For example, at elder gatherings speak the Native language. Through creative ways keep first language speakers engaged.
- In curriculum emphasize interconnectedness of language, culture, and nature. Learn every minute of the lifecycle.
- Waadookodaading Ojibwe Language Immersion School is developing a Language Institute model to develop teachers, recognizing that no one else can train and support the teachers they need.
- Follow the school calendar, create a family camp, include older students and pair them with younger students, be a language model, build connections with the young children.
- The National Coalition of Native American Language Schools and Programs was founded in 2014 to help stabilize indigenous language programs. The web site has information on policy making and practices. Fourteen schools are represented in the coalition.
- Elders telling their own stories (how they lived, grew up, their experiences).

Barriers to providing early childhood language immersion programs

- Full immersion programs is not a focus of public schools and teacher licensing, and requirements make it hard to find fluent speakers who can fully commit to these efforts.
- Cultural knowledge is also critical. For example, teachers need to know what a wild rice plant looks and how to harvest it, not just the Ojibwe word for it.
- Other competing initiatives and required activities of teachers can pull their focus away from language.
- Americans tend to be skeptical or fearful of different languages, and many Native parents and grandparents were punished for speaking their languages.
- Copyright issues can make it challenging to secure permissions to make translations of articles and books into a Native language.
- How to retain intellectual property rights after producing curriculum for a Native language.
- Payments to first language speakers and teachers for writing materials and books. Developing appropriate amounts and securing funding for payments.

- Policies regarding Native languages. For example, including more signage in Native languages, similar to the rights Puerto Rico has to make signs in Spanish.
- Status of indigenous languages. For many of these languages the number of first speakers is decreasing.

How communities can address barriers

- Everyone in community must understand what language immersion means.
- Help people understand how language immersion benefits other academic skills.
- Field linguistic class -- teach linguists how to most effectively gather information from first speakers.
- Language teachers can share their program's Native language events across schools and other programs.
- Develop standard language immersion teacher assessments in the Native language.
- Connect with school district's English language learning (ELL) department.
- Advocate and affect policy. Vote!
- Add to the coalition of supporters for Native language immersion programs. Academic supporters are needed.
- Look at regulations, for example Head Start policy, and how language immersion fits or doesn't fit.
- Be at the table when issues regarding local, state, and federal education policy are discussed and decided. Also, bring other people to the table.
- Language revitalization is encouraged when a tribal government passes a resolution that names the tribal language as the community's official language.