

Language Planning Challenges and Prospects in Native American Communities and Schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This policy brief addresses the dual challenges facing Native American communities in their language planning and policy (LPP) efforts: maintaining heritage/community languages, and providing culturally responsive and empowering education. Using profiles of heritage-language immersion programs that have enabled Indigenous communities to reclaim their languages and incorporate local cultural knowledge in school curricula, it is clear that “additive” or enrichment approaches are beneficial to students in such communities. These cases are significant because they show heritage-language immersion to be superior to English-only instruction even for students who enter school with limited proficiency in the heritage language. However, heritage-language immersion conflicts with the language policy of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which provides no provisions for instruction or assessment in tribal or other non-English languages.

Heritage language loss and shift toward English are occurring at an escalating pace in Indigenous communities throughout North America. Of 210 Native languages

still spoken in the U.S. and Canada, only 34 (16 percent) are still being acquired as a first language by children. Unlike “world” languages, such as Spanish, Indigenous languages have no external pool of speakers to replace dwindling speech communities; the loss of an Indigenous language is terminal. Because language is the primary medium through which social, communal, and governance relationships are constructed, the loss of a heritage language negatively impacts those relationships as well. Thus, rights to language are fundamental to maintaining distinctive personal and tribal identities, and cannot be decoupled from larger struggles for Indigenous self-determination and cultural survival.

In the past, Native languages were viewed as oppositional to the interests of state-controlled schooling; the prohibition of speaking Native languages in schools for Native American students has been a major cause of language shift. Paradoxically, schools today have, in some cases, become allies in LPP efforts to revitalize Indigenous languages. In the bulk of this article, we illustrate these efforts through four “telling” cases. In each case, heritage-language immersion has been employed as a primary strategy to cultivate heritage-language proficiency among youth. The Pueblos of the Southwest and the Blackfeet of Montana illustrate community-based approaches to language revitalization; Native Hawaiian and Navajo immersion represent school-based approaches.

These programs have had salutary effects on both language revitalization and academic achievement. In particular, data from school-based heritage-language immersion indicates that children acquire the heritage language as a second language without “cost” to their English language development or academic achievement, as

measured by local and national (standardized) tests. Conversely, comparable students in English mainstream programs perform less well than immersion students in some subject areas, including English writing and mathematics, and tend to lose whatever heritage-language ability they had upon entering school. These programs highlight the benefits of “additive” or enrichment approaches to language education, and stand in contrast to “subtractive” programs aimed at eradicating or replacing non-English mother tongues.

In light of these findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

- Heritage-language immersion is a viable alternative to English-only instruction for Native students who are English-dominant but identified as limited English proficient.
- Time spent learning a heritage/community language is *not* time lost in developing English, while the absence of sustained heritage-language instruction contributes significantly to heritage-language loss.
- It takes approximately five to seven years to acquire age-appropriate proficiency in a heritage (second) language when consistent and comprehensive opportunities in the heritage (second) language are provided.
- Heritage-language immersion contributes to positive child-adult interaction and helps restore and strengthen Native languages, familial relationships, and cultural traditions within the community.
- Literacy skills first developed in a heritage language can be effectively transferred to English, even for students with limited proficiency in the heritage language upon entering school.

- Additive or enrichment programs using heritage-language immersion represent the most promising approach to heritage- and second-language instruction.
- The aforementioned LPP efforts are fundamental to tribal sovereignty and local education choice.

These language programs face challenges in the present “policy moment.” On the positive side, the programs profiled here, and numerous others throughout the U.S., have support from the 1990/1992 Native American Languages Act (NALA). However, the guarantees of NALA and the LPP efforts it supports are threatened by the growing movement for high-stakes, English standardized testing. This movement is represented most palpably in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Research on the consequences of NCLB for Native American and other language minority learners suggests that NCLB is widening rather than closing the achievement gap.

In conclusion, the authors call for recognition and support of proven heritage-language instructional approaches as vehicles for education that is both academically sound and supportive of Native American languages and cultures.