



THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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In 1994, only 10 percent of the members of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe were fluent in the Band's native language, and the youngest native speaker was 37. Faced with these statistics, tribal leaders had great cause for concern—declining language use was a disturbing indicator of the loss of tribal traditions. The Band's Chief Executive summarized her colleagues' sentiment: "Our families were not engaging in our traditions, our children were turning away from our values, and little by little we were losing the battle to protect the uniqueness of our culture." If allowed to continue, the effects of this change would be broad sweeping. For example, because Band members had long considered knowledge of Ojibwe traditions a prerequisite to leadership, few in the succeeding generations would be prepared to step into leadership roles.

Educators working at the Band's Nay Ah Shing School were the first to take action against this problem. Since its founding in 1978, the tribal school had served Ojibwe families who preferred a Band-controlled, reservation-based education for their children. While it was successful in providing this choice, the School had yet to actively incorporate Ojibwe culture and language into its curriculum and activities. But in 1995, recognizing the dangers implied by the Band's loss of traditional knowledge, school staff members changed that. They created an Elders Advisory Board, invited five traditionalists to serve on it, and gave them a charge—to help the School structure an Ojibwe language and culture program.

Today, the tribally funded Ojibwe Language Program serves 350 students, from toddlers to teenagers. The very youngest students—those in Head Start and day care programs across the reservation—spend four to eight hours a day with a fluent Ojibwe instructor. Kindergarten to twelfth-grade students at the Nay Ah Shing School attend daily 35-45 minute Ojibwe language classes. Even Band members attending non-tribal public schools have the opportunity to benefit from the Program, as the high school language classes at Nay Ah Shing are broadcast on interactive television to them.

Program pedagogy places a strong emphasis on usefulness and fun. The teachers and elders who designed the Program believe strongly that Ojibwe will take root among the young only if language learning is relevant and enjoyable. To accomplish these goals, language instructors rely on conversation, classroom interaction, singing, and comic books. To demonstrate that Ojibwe is a living language, for example, K-12 classes are taught by two speakers, so that students can hear actual, fluent, and complete conversations in Ojibwe. And, with elders as instructors, student-teacher conversations become a means not only of

language instruction, but also of satisfying students' curiosity about cultural practices and values. The music teacher and students write songs in Ojibwe to be sung by the Nay Ah Shing choir. The choir has become so popular that, despite recess-time rehearsals, almost all students participate. The Program's comic books teach language in an amusing format while tackling important contemporary issues. For instance, the book "Dreams of Looking Up" discusses the challenging concept of American Indian nations' sovereignty.

Although the Program is young, its success is already apparent. Last year, every Nay Ah Shing fourth grader gave a short "graduation" speech in Ojibwe. School music and video projects have helped make it "cool" for youth to speak to each other in Ojibwe, and some students have even composed Ojibwe "rap" songs. Hearing their children speak, many parents have expressed a desire to learn to speak the language with their children, and plans are underway to make this Program growth possible. In sum, the Program has increased the pride that Mille Lacs Band members, young and old, feel in knowing their language and practicing their traditions.

An additional Program success has come from the Band's wide distribution of the comic book "Dreams of Looking Up." Many Minnesota educators, librarians, media representatives, legislators, and especially students have read and are using the Mille Lacs book, making it an important tool for communication between Indians and non-Indians about the often-confusing issue of tribal sovereignty.

Language and other traditional knowledge sustain American Indian nations—they are an integral part of the fabric that binds a Native society together. The Ojibwe Language Program strengthens the Mille Lacs Band's unique cultural resources and thus strengthens the nation. In particular, the Language Program gives Mille Lacs youth the self-confidence and cultural pride necessary for them to become the Band's next generation of leaders.

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