



## THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

### HONORING NATIONS: 2005 HONOREE

#### **The Cherokee Language Revitalization Project Cherokee Nation Language Department The Cherokee Nation**

Contact:  
PO Box 948  
Tahlequah, OK 74465  
Phone: 918-456-0671  
Web: [www.cherokee.org](http://www.cherokee.org)

*In 2002, the Cherokee Nation carried out a survey of its population and found no fluent Cherokee speakers under the age of 40. The Cherokee Principal Chief declared a state of emergency, and the Nation acted accordingly. With great focus and determination, it launched a multi-faceted initiative designed to revitalize the Cherokee language. Using state-of-the-art knowledge and techniques of language acquisition, the Project includes a language immersion program for pre-school children, a university partnership degree program for certifying Cherokee language teachers, and a set of community language activities. The Project brings together elders, young adults, and children in an effort to preserve not just a language but a people who see in their language the foundation of their own survival.*

For the citizens of the Cherokee Nation, the need to prioritize language revitalization became more urgent in light of the results of the 2002 research survey funded by the United States Department of Health & Human Services Administration for Native Americans. While in 2000 there were an estimated 10,000 speakers of the Cherokee language in the state of Oklahoma, by 2002 the survey found no fluent speakers under the age of 40. Based on research of endangered languages, the Cherokee Nation estimated that the language would die out in one to two generations. The survey found, as one possible cause, that many elders resist speaking to their children and grandchildren in Cherokee in the belief that it will help them avoid the negative experiences of their own generation. Based on the results of the study, Principle Chief Smith declared a state of emergency and preservation of the Cherokee language became a top priority for the Cherokee Nation. Organizing a task force comprised of elders, educators and concerned citizens, the Cherokee Nation Language Department formulated a comprehensive language plan to preserve, protect and promote the Cherokee language.

The resulting Cherokee Language Revitalization Project is a carefully planned, multi-faceted approach to language preservation. The Project's overall objectives are preserving the Cherokee language, teaching the Cherokee language to future generations, and expanding the language to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. To accomplish these goals, project department staff employs a three-prong approach, first the use of language immersion programs, second the establishment of Cherokee-driven education degree programs at a local university, and third a focus on whole community language activities.

Based on research showing that investment in younger speakers is the most effective way to

promote language fluency and continuation, the Cherokee Language Immersion School began in 2003 with a preschool program, adding a kindergarten class in the fall of 2005. By targeting youth, the Nation hopes to develop a new interest in Cherokee culture and language that these young children will take with them through elementary school, junior high, and high school. Plans for the future include adding a grade level each year until the school serves students through the 12th grade. Fundamental to the Language Revitalization Project is the development of an evidence-based curriculum, designed to teach Cherokee language and culture, which simultaneously prepares students to excel on standardized tests required by the state. Working with a hand-picked team from the Cherokee Nation Education and Culture Department, the School ensures that each grade is provided with the highest possible quality materials that reinforce the language, meet state standards, and are appealing to the children. Relocating the school near the education department offices enables the team to visit the immersion classrooms on a routine basis, learn what strategies are successful in the classroom, and adjust their curricular materials accordingly. They have also generated new ideas for presenting materials, translating English-based books (e.g., Curious George) into the Cherokee language and even created a new Cherokee character whom the children better identify with, as well as developing a book in Cherokee around that character. In addition, the Curriculum Development team developed card and computer games in the Cherokee language as additional learning tools to ensure that the materials seem as fun as what is available in English.

Beginning in the fall of 2005, the Nation piloted a satellite immersion program at a local public school in order to broaden the reach of the language program and to address the issue of Cherokee students who are being educated outside of the Nation. In the public education setting, the Nation pays for half of the teacher's salary and half of the day is conducted in Cherokee. The Department has further plans to integrate the principles of the immersion program into the junior high school level (late immersion) as part of a Cherokee leadership and culture curriculum. The Language Revitalization Project also encompasses community language activities to reinforce the Cherokee language. These include the Cherokee Youth Choir, a weekly all-Cherokee radio show, and on-line classes geared to adult learners. The Language Revitalization Project also oversees a program to replace English-only signs on government property with bilingual Cherokee-English ones.

As another facet of its Language Revitalization Project, the Nation recognizes the need to ensure an adequate supply of teachers for the program. Working with Northeastern State University (NSU) the Nation developed a new degree program to create a teacher pipeline. The Bachelor of Education in Cherokee Education degree program at NSU the first of its kind in Oklahoma helps produce state-certified teachers with an additional focus on Cherokee language and culture. This aspect of the project allows the Nation to begin the process of training new teachers to fulfill an anticipated teacher shortage for their Language Revitalization Project programs in years to come. At the same time, it is attractive to students since program graduates can teach in any public school in the state. The Nation began offering scholarships to Cherokee speakers currently enrolled in the education department at NSU to complete their general requirements and enroll in Cherokee education courses under the new degree program. Creating high quality teachers also includes attention to recruitment. In order to attract the few available Cherokee speaking teachers into the program, the Nation offers compensation packages over and above the state pay rate. Additionally, as part of its recruitment plan, the Nation pays teachers 25% more than non-immersion teachers as an incentive to choose the Cherokee Education degree option.

The result of this integrated approach is a flourishing immersion program with a waiting list for new students and a strong response to the Cherokee Education major option at NSU. There

are currently fifteen children in the preschool class and ten in the kindergarten class. During the school day only Cherokee is spoken by both the children and the teachers and several of the kindergarten students can read using the Cherokee syllabary. In the first year of the Bachelor of Arts in Education Cherokee Education degree program over forty students enrolled in the major at NSU, significantly exceeding the expectations of the university administration and the Nation. Another twenty students are taking Cherokee language and education courses at NSU and the Education and Culture Department anticipates that in four years, the first graduates from NSU will begin applying for teaching positions in their expanding courses at the Cherokee Language Immersion School. The efforts of the Language Revitalization Project are also positively changing community attitudes about the language. In the words of one tribal citizen, the little children really get [to] people. Elders have tears in their eyes when they see the preschoolers arguing with each other in Cherokee.

The Cherokee government mandates the preservation and proliferation of Cherokee language and culture as a priority for the tribe. With full support from the Nation, the Language Department consulted elders and community members, conducted research to determine what strategies would likely be most successful at Cherokee, and worked to develop the partnerships needed to accomplish their goals. While many aspects of the program are inspired by others, including the Native Hawaiian immersion program, the Cherokee nation carefully selects and adapts available best practice strategies to create a distinctly Cherokee approach that reflects their own sense of identity while addressing their resources and needs. By taking a thoughtful and deliberate approach to prioritizing the preservation and proliferation of tribal language and culture, nations can use research and local resources to create language programs for their youth. Public satellite programs for the Nation's youth being educated in public schools, partnerships between the Nation and institutions of higher education to create culturally competent teachers, and the development high quality curricula and materials that reinforce the language, meet state standards, and are appealing to the children serve to fulfill the mandate.

The approach to language revitalization at Cherokee, with an emphasis on goal setting and research-based decision making, stands as an example to other tribal nations and their governments. The long-term future of the program is strengthened by the development of the teacher training program which will supply new teachers for the growing immersion and language programs. The multi-faceted approach increases the sustainability of these efforts, by providing flexibility and reinforcement in meeting language preservation goals.

#### Lessons:

- Tribal governments faced with potential loss of language can increase resource capabilities by forming partnerships with experts and local institutions of higher learning to create innovative systems of language immersion and revitalization programs.
- Successful language revitalization begins with tribal governments empowering their community with the relevant resources and capabilities needed to ensure implementation.
- Multi-pronged efforts that provide various entry points to language access greatly enhance language survival and increase citizen participation.