



SITTING BULL COLLEGE  
**Wičhákini Owáyawa Immersion Program**  
PUBLIC INFORMATION BRIEF. JULY 2018

*This information brief presents selected findings from the RMC Research Evaluation Report, based on data collected during the 2017-2018 school year.*

Begun in 2012 with a grant from the Administration for Native Americans (ANA), the Sitting Bull College Immersion Nest featured a classroom of eleven 3-year-old students. Called in Lakota Lakhó'iyapi Wahóŋpi (Lakota language nest), the preschool immersion program was viewed as a central element of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's language revitalization efforts. Under a second ANA grant received by Sitting Bull College in 2015, the immersion program was extended into elementary levels and now operates in Kindergarten through third grade. The elementary immersion program, called Wičhákini Owáyawa, or revitalization school, is housed at the college in a room across from the preschool class.

RMC Research Corporation carried out the evaluation of the Wičhákini Owáyawa Immersion Program through a mixed methods formative and summative evaluation designed to assess program impacts on students, Lakota language teachers, families, and community members. All evaluation instruments were developed by RMC Research and revised and approved by program staff and administrators in the fall of 2015. Site visits were conducted in the spring of each project year, most recently in April/May of 2018, and included interviews or focus groups with project administrators, Lakota language teachers, and parents of students in the program. Several observations were conducted in the elementary immersion classroom. The third year annual report was issued on July 15, 2018.

#### PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Wičhákini Owáyawa program has several main objectives. These include:

1. Provision of **culturally-rich language immersion classes** for students in pre-primary, primary, and elementary grades;
2. Alignment of immersion class content with **North Dakota State Standards**;
3. **Regular assessment** of student progress;
4. **In-depth and ongoing professional development** for language immersion teachers; and
5. **Extensive parent involvement**, including language classes designed to increase the use of the Lakota language in the home environment.

Activities were conducted in Lakota with the intention of using no English inside of the classrooms. The teachers and curriculum directors devised a monthly curriculum plan that incorporated seasonal and culturally appropriate themes and created assessments to measure the progress students were making in academic, social, and emotional development.

All respondents agreed that the program provided a culturally rich and academically stimulating learning environment for children. Parents, teachers, and administrators deeply valued the fact that children were keeping the language alive and believed that children were learning from and developing respect for elders. Administrators and teachers said that because of the immersion school, there was now a cohort of families who promoted the language and culture in the community.

Administrators and teachers agreed that professional development given to the teachers was of high quality. In September of 2017, for example, two teachers from the Waadookodaading Ojibwe Immersion School in Wisconsin conducted a presentation on immersion techniques and lessons. Another example of a professional development session took place in December of 2017, when instructors from the University of Mary in Bismarck led a training on classroom management techniques and working with students who have behavioral challenges. In the summer of 2018, immersion teachers participated in the three-week Dakota/Lakota Summer Institute, an annual professional development event focused on the teaching and learning of the Dakota and Lakota languages and co-sponsored by Sitting Bull College and the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.

Parent language classes were held approximately twice a month to facilitate the use of the Lakota language in the home as well as the school environment. In addition to the parent language classes, the program also sponsored a number of family events that allowed children, parents, and other family and community members to come together and enjoy social and cultural activities. In November of 2017 and April of 2018, parent-teacher conferences were held to inform parents about the social, emotional, academic, and linguistic progress of their children.



Children in the K-3 immersion class learn the words of the Lakota Flag Song from an elder aide.

## SELECTED FINDINGS

- **In observed K-3 classes, there was substantial evidence that students were acquiring and practicing Lakota vocabulary during lessons.** Teachers would speak new words, guide children in repeating the words or phrases, and then have children practice new vocabulary through worksheets, art activities, movement, or games. Teachers utilized experiential techniques as the basis of almost all instructional activities.
- **Students displayed respectful behavior toward teachers and classmates.** Teachers consistently modeled respectful interactions and students were almost always observed as being on task with activities and assignments.

- **Survey data indicated that teachers were less than confident in their ability to use assessments to measure student progress in writing and speaking Lakota.** Teachers also lacked confidence in their ability to analyze and use assessment data to improve student language acquisition. Teachers reported, generally, they had not received adequate professional development on using assessments and techniques to enhance language instruction. Teachers were confident in their ability to develop lesson plans to be used with the curriculum but still wanted more training in this area.
- **With a grant from the National Science Foundation, a new program called Ĥpečášni [full of life] was initiated this year.** According to one of the program instructors, the research grant is designed to investigate teaching methods for language instruction that are best suited to the learning styles of people living on the reservation. The study is also examining the factors that motivate adult learners to acquire the language. The class met every weekday; instruction was provided on Mondays through Thursdays of each week, and every Friday students updated their blogs. The blogs were analyzed for the research to learn what activities students most enjoyed and helped them learn best.
- **Families reported speaking the Lakota language more at home with their children.** Parents felt it was important for them to learn the language so they could better support their children and help to restore the culture in the local community. Parents, however, sometimes struggled to attend language classes because of work, school, or family responsibilities.
- **All respondents perceived that the immersion school had profound and positive impacts on the community.** Administrators, parents, and teachers thought the program served to build a sense of pride among community members in being Lakota. They also thought that interest in learning and using the language was increasing as students shared the language with siblings, parents, and other family members. Respondents said the students were highly visible in the community, singing at community events and speaking the language in public places.
- **Program administrators agreed that lessons developed for the immersion program generally aligned with current state standards.** In the 2017-2018 academic year, the state of North Dakota eliminated Common Core State Standards and replaced them with a new set of standards. One administrator pointed out that in most public schools, teachers examine the standards and create their lessons. But in the immersion school, the process is reversed: lessons are created with an emphasis on culture, and then the standards are examined to see how they match the lessons. To the curriculum directors, this process of developing curriculum is concerned with honoring tribal sovereignty and teaching children what is appropriate in their tribal community.
- **The curriculum continues to be based on seasonally and culturally appropriate themes associated with the Lakota calendar.** Teachers and administrators agreed that the entire curriculum was based on activities related to the Lakota culture and included projects related to the different seasons. For example, summer is the time for ceremonies and the children learned how to make dried meat that is placed in bowls for ritual use. Each afternoon, students were engaged in cultural activities such as music and art.

- **Administrators described another asset of the program as the work being done by the two part-time curriculum directors.** While many lessons had been developed by instructors in the last few years, there was little catalogued or placed online. The curriculum directors collaborated with each other and the teachers to create lesson plans, formulate appropriate assessments, file lessons electronically, and establish scope and sequence for the lessons.



Two students and a teacher work together on pinning fabric that will be used to make a shawl.

## PROGRAM SUSTAINABILITY

The immersion school has continued its collaboration with Sitting Bull College to train second language learners and immersion teachers. Discussions were held with the Standing Rock Community Development Corporation to help expand the program into a more spacious facility and allow for enrollment of a larger number of students; plans are currently underway to remodel an unused school building in the town of Fort Yates to accommodate the immersion school. The immersion school is also seeking accreditation through the Tribal Department of Education to make the program more appealing to prospective families. This year, administrators hired a professional facilitator to oversee the development of a strategic plan for the immersion program.

The program received several grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and submitted applications for several other grant funds. Immersion school staff has also been cultivating a relationship with the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, which has an interest in initiatives supporting Native communities, and hopes to submit a proposal to the foundation in the next few months.

Program administrators continued to develop the project website at <http://wotakuye.weebly.com/>. The website provides an overview of the immersion classes and contains a variety of Lakota language resources for teachers, parents, and students including children's books translated from English into Lakota, several Lakota audio books, Lakota language videos, downloadable materials, and flashcards. The site also provides a yearly calendar of activities and postings of weekly instructional themes.