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## **In the Language of Our Ancestors**

### **Programs in Montana and Washington Give Voice to Disappearing Words**

Story by Mindy Cameron / Photos by William M. Berg

RONAN and ARLEE, Montana— Students in Eva Boyd's class are typical teenagers. They fidget, wisecrack, talk to friends, and only occasionally pay attention.

But when asked why they are in this class, they speak with one voice: We are losing our language; we want to preserve our heritage. The presence of these Salish teens in this classroom, along with Eva Boyd, a tribal elder, is testimony to that singular desire to save a culture by saving the language.

Across Indian Country, many efforts to revive and revitalize Native American languages are under way. And none too soon. Estimates vary, but of the hundreds of languages that existed here before the arrival of white settlers, as many as two-thirds may have disappeared. Of those that remain, many could die along with the elders, the dwindling brain trust of tribal language.

Boyd's story shows why so many of these languages disappeared, why some survived, and how they might be saved.

*As students peer out the window, Pat Pierre conducts a weather lesson at a tribal-run language immersion preschool in Montana.*



## **THE TOLL OF ASSIMILATION**

From the late 19th century until the mid-20th century, the national policy regarding American Indians and Alaska Natives was assimilation. After decades of removing indigenous people from their land to reservations, the federal government sought to mainstream them into American society.

Education was a critical aspect of the assimilation policy. It was believed that through education, Native Americans would learn the white man's language and culture and develop the skills to function effectively in white man's society. By 1887 the federal government had established more than 200 Indian schools to carry out this mission.



*Eva Boyd came out of retirement to teach three Salish language classes at Ronan High School.*

Like many of her tribal contemporaries, Boyd was sent to an Indian boarding school. At the typical boarding school, children were punished for speaking their traditional language. Some were made to stand in the corner, others had their knuckles rapped or rags tied around their mouths. Many children eventually forgot their tribal language, and those who remembered were often ashamed to use it.

Eva Boyd managed to escape that fate. She was a willful 10-year-old when she went to boarding school. Decades later, she explains simply, "I didn't like it, so I left." Three days after she arrived, Boyd walked out and hitchhiked back home to the Camas Prairie area of the Flathead Reservation in Western Montana. There, her grandmother raised her in the language of their ancestors.

*Holly Burland and her classmates have just one storybook that's been translated into Salish.*



Boyd, a former foreign language instructor at Salish Kootenai College, came out of retirement to teach three Salish language classes at Ronan High School. For her, it's a simple matter of tribal survival. "If we don't keep the language alive our tribe is going down. Without the language we won't be Indians any more."

Students in her class understand that and struggle to learn the language. A difficult task is made more difficult by a lack of resources. The sole text is a Salish storybook, *The Story of a Mean Little Old Lady*, with English translation.

"We have to do the best we can," says Boyd. Like her students, Boyd wishes Native language instruction could start earlier, at an age when learning a new language is not so difficult.

Julie Cajune agrees. She is Indian Education Coordinator for the Ronan-Pablo School District. She admires and values what Eva Boyd is doing. "A teacher such as Eva is one way to make the school more reflective of the community," she says, "but we are doing language at the wrong end."

"Go to Nkwusm," Cajune insists.

## **STARTING EARLY**

Thirty miles down the road at Arlee, in a former bowling alley that also houses a casino, is Nkwusm. It's a tribal-run language immersion school for preschoolers.



*Stephen Small Salmon listens to a Salish story with one of his young students.*

Five little ones squirm on the floor at the feet of two elders, Pat Pierre and Stephen Small Salmon. Like Boyd, the adults are fluent in Salish and committed to keeping the language alive, even if it means coming out of retirement, as Pierre has done.

On this damp and chilly day, he is reviewing the Salish names for months, days of the week, and numbers. The children vigorously recite the words. They follow Pierre to the window where he points to the sky, the ground, and the distant hills. It is a short lesson in Salish about the weather.

Pierre explains, "The power and wisdom of language is what has kept our people together so that we can do meaningful things. If I can teach the little ones the language, then we keep our identity."

The research is clear about learning languages. A second language is more easily acquired early on as children develop their language skills, rather than at a later stage. That has great importance for indigenous people facing the extinction of their ancestral language. Language is more than words and rules of usage. It is the repository of culture and identity.

## **USING LANGUAGE NESTS**

In Nkwusm, the Salish are replicating what has worked elsewhere to revive indigenous languages; they are using what's called a "language nest." As the name implies, a language nest is more than just another language program. It is language immersion for the youngest members of a Native population.

When the Maoris of New Zealand faced the extinction of their language more than 20 years ago, they created language nests. Hawaiians soon adopted the Maori model and, in the mid-1990s, a similar program was established on the Blackfeet Reservation in Northwest Montana.

Language nests are seen by many as a key to reviving tribal languages. Last year Hawaii Senator Daniel Inouye proposed an amendment to the Native American Languages Act of 1990. If passed, it would provide federal government support for Native American survival schools, including language nests. The 1990 act establishes as national policy the government's responsibility to "preserve, protect, and promote the rights of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop" their Native languages.

Last May, at a U.S. Senate hearing on the proposed amendment, a delegation representing the Blackfeet Nation stressed the difference between Native American language survival schools and public schools. "The academic outcomes of Native American language survival schools are as strong as, or stronger than, public education systems and students become speakers of their Native language," they said.

The Blackfeet Native language school in Browning, Montana—Nizipuhwasin—has become a model for Nkwusm and for other communities that hope to develop programs for young speakers of tribal languages.

Few tribes, however, can sustain such schools indefinitely. Founders of Nkwusm, which is now

supported by grants and the Salish-Kootenai tribe, hope eventually to be self-sustaining. They also seek to have an endowment, run a K–12 school, and provide distance learning for the Flathead Reservation.

As important as tribal programs such as Nizipuhwasin and Nkwusm are, the current reality is that most Native youth are educated in public schools, not tribal-run classrooms. Native educators say if traditional languages are to be saved, public schools will have to play a key role.

## **INTEGRATING LANGUAGE**

In Washington's Marysville School District, Tulalip Elementary offers one example of how to develop an integrated curriculum of language, literature, and culture with Lushootseed—the language of the Tulalip tribe—at the center.

The program began several years ago at the school, which is about 70 percent American Indian. Tribal members and district staff worked together to develop a Tulalip-based classroom in the fourth grade. A non-Native teacher teamed with a tribal language teacher to create a new curriculum, which has now evolved into Lushootseed language and culture instruction at every grade level.

Any curriculum introduced in schools today must meet state standards and the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The Tulalip-based curriculum in Marysville has managed to do that.

One of many challenges for schools that already have—or would like to start—Native language programs is finding qualified teachers. Some states have responded to that need by authorizing alternative certification for Native language teachers. In Montana, Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, the authority for granting certification to these teachers has been delegated to tribal authorities. (In Alaska, this authority is reserved for each school board or regional educational attendance area.)

Once a tribe has determined an applicant is fluent enough to qualify, he or she is recommended for certification to the State Board of Education. Upon certification, Native language teachers, usually tribal elders, get the same pay and benefits and must meet the same requirements for continuing education as other certified teachers.

There have been some issues involving classroom management. "(That's) no small matter in a room with more than a dozen teenagers," notes Julie Cajune. Even so, she thinks it's a good move. Without certification, Native language teachers, who were paid at the level of teacher aides, were devalued.

The Montana Board of Public Education adopted its policy for alternative certification, called Class 7 Specialist Certificate for Native American Languages, in 1995. At that time one tribe identified only five elders who were fluent in their Native language. Today, there are 112 Class 7 teachers in Montana.

Washington state adopted its alternative certification in 2003. It is a three-year pilot program with the purpose of contributing "to the recovery, revitalization, and promotion of First Peoples' languages. " By the end of the first year, seven teachers had been certified under the program.

## **INDIAN ENGLISH**

Teaching Native American children, whether the subject is reading, math, or their indigenous language, presents a unique set of circumstances. While very few Native youngsters speak the language of their ancestors, their first language is not necessarily the English of their white classmates, either. The first language of two-thirds of American Indian youth today is Indian English, according to a research report by Washington state's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Evergreen Center for Educational Improvement at Evergreen State College in Olympia.

Authors of the report, Magda Costantino and Joe St. Charles of Evergreen, and Denny Hurtado of

OSPI, describe Indian English as English dialects used by American Indians that do not conform in certain ways to standard English. Despite the differences, however, the dialects "are nonetheless well-ordered and highly structured languages that reflect the linguistic competencies that must underlie all languages."

In American Indian English, W.L. Leap provides important context for the restoration of Native languages. He writes that distinctive characteristics of Indian English—what he calls "codes"—"derive, in large part, from their close association with their speakers' ancestral language traditions. In many cases, rules of grammar and discourse from that tradition provide the basis for grammar and discourse in these English codes—even in instances where the speakers are not fluent in their ancestral language."

It can be argued, then, that Indian English serves as a language bridge between the past and present. Understanding the role and importance of Indian English, however, may not be as big a hurdle as the larger issues and prevailing attitudes about language use and instruction. Many people believe that because English is the dominant language, instruction should be in English and all students should learn its proper usage. Disagreement about the role and importance of bilingual education is a fact of life in many school districts, tossing up one more barrier to public school efforts to become involved in Native language revival.

## **WHAT RESEARCH SHOWS**

Advocates of Native language revival programs point to research that shows academic advantages for children who speak two languages. Gina Cantoni, a language pedagogy professor at Northern Arizona University, has written of "abundant evidence" that teaching the home language does not interfere with the development of English skills. To the contrary, she notes, instruction that "promotes proficiency in one's first language also promotes proficiency in the second language."

Cantoni contends that "mastery of more than one linguistic code results in a special kind of cognitive flexibility." Unfortunately, she notes, the "special" abilities related to mastery of more than one language are not covered by most tests used to measure academic achievement.

Research reinforces the argument for expanding Native language instruction. Even more compelling are the voices of Native American advocates, from the students in Eva Boyd's class to the elders teaching youngsters at Nkwusm and to longtime Montana educator Joyce Silverthorne.

Silverthorne, a member of the Salish tribe of the Flathead Reservation in Montana, has been a classroom teacher, college instructor, school board member, program administrator on the reservation, and member of the Montana Board of Public Education, where she worked for passage of the Montana Class 7 certificate.

While language and culture are linked in all societies, "what is unique to Native Americans is that this is our homeland," says Silverthorne. "There is no 'old country' to return to. When language dies here, it dies forever."

Nkwusm founder and teacher Melanie Sandoval is committed to seeing that doesn't happen. Now 28, she says she has been trying to learn the language of her tribe as long as she can remember. She now learns along with the children, thanks to the two elders who come into the classroom six hours a day, five days a week. After years of formal study, she is now learning useful, everyday phrases like "blow your nose" and "jump down off that."

What's happening at the school is more than preserving the language. Sandoval observes that preservation "is like having a bottle on the shelf. We want to breathe life into the language, to speak it, and pass it on to the next generation."