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Education Week

## A Culture Put to the Test

**For Navajo children, a rigorous program draws on tradition to spur achievement.**

By [Mary Ann Zehr](#)

*Fort Defiance, Ariz.*

Ask Marilyn Begay why the Navajo-immersion school where she is a 5th grade teacher has fared well in meeting student-achievement goals under the No Child Left Behind Act, and she'll say it's because the school integrates Navajo language and culture into its curriculum.

Put the same question to Maggie Benally, the school's principal, and she'll credit instruction driven by analysis of students' test scores. The Navajo Language Immersion School—Tséhootsooí Diné Bi'ólta', to use its Navajo name—made adequate yearly progress in all subgroups under the federal law last school year, Ms. Benally said, because "the teachers know exactly where their students are in terms of data."



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The K-8 school with 235 students in the Window Rock Unified School District, here on the reservation of the Navajo Nation, draws on both Navajo tradition and modern accountability tools to improve student achievement.

The hybrid is viewed as a model in Indian Country and elsewhere. The school has attracted visits from members of Apache, Cherokee, and Pueblo Indian tribes, and its teachers and administrators have given presentations at national conferences sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and the Washington-based National Association for Bilingual Education. It's easy to see why. Tséhootsooí Diné Bi'ólta' (Tseh-HO-Tso Di-NEH Bi-OL-tuh), which means "the Navajo school in the meadow between two canyons," has made AYP while many schools that serve Native American students—including three of the four other elementary schools in the Window Rock district—have not.



(Requires [Macromedia Flash Player](#).)

Nationally, only 30 percent of the 184 Bureau of Indian Education schools run by the federal government on reservations and formerly called Bureau of Indian Affairs schools are making AYP, the central gauge of performance under the 5-year-old No Child Left Behind law. In Arizona, 55 percent of the 141 regular public schools on American Indian reservations made adequate progress last year.

Educators at the Navajo-immersion school, in which 71 percent of students are from low-income families, have embraced state academic standards and federal accountability requirements under the law through a school improvement plan.

But the school also teaches standards for Navajo culture published by the tribe and operates a program intended to teach literacy and improve oral proficiency in *Diné*—the word Navajos use for their people and language.

Kindergartners and 1st graders receive all instruction in Navajo. Lessons in English, including reading, begin in 2nd grade and occupy an increasing amount of class time with additional grades. By 6th grade, children receive half their instruction in each language.

There is no question that school leaders see the infusion of native culture and language as a key to its success.

"This staff is saying, 'We can compete with anyone in America, and we can do it in two languages,' " said Thomas A. Jackson, the superintendent for the 2,900-student Window Rock school system.

### Cultural Preservation

The Navajo-immersion school started in 1986 as a strand of classes spread out among several schools. A 2003-04 school year study showed that students in the immersion strands scored significantly better on the state assessment, Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards, or AIMS, than did their peers who were receiving instruction only in English. Three years ago, the immersion classes were consolidated into one school, which became Tséhootsooí Diné Bi'ólta'.

### Navajo-Immersion School's Test Performance

#### In the 2005-06 School Year

The percentage of students passing the reading and math portions of the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards, the state assessment, was high enough for the school to make adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act.

\*Click image to see the full chart.

3	Reading	42'	53.3
4	Reading	42'	45
5	Reading	44	43.3
6	Reading	47	45
7	Reading	42'	49
3	Math	52	43.3
4	Math	50'	54
5	Math	44	33.3
6	Math	35'	43

SOURCE: Window Rock Unified School District

Saving an indigenous language often is the primary motivation for immersion programs, according to William G. Demmert Jr., a professor of education at Western Washington University, in Bellingham, Wash., who is leading a study of four indigenous-language-immersion schools in the United States, including the Navajo school.

That's certainly been an issue in Window Rock. The loss of the use of Navajo has been so great that English is the first language of all the children who attend the Navajo-immersion school. A language survey by the school district shows that in 1979, 89 percent of children entering kindergarten in schools in Fort Defiance were fluent in Navajo, but by 1989, that proportion had dropped to 3 percent. Few quantitative research studies have been done that measure the impact of a culture-based curriculum on student achievement, said Mr. Demmert, whose team developed the indigenous-language test used as the benchmark given by the Navajo-immersion school three times a year.

But Mr. Demmert, a member of the Oglala Sioux and Alaska Tlingit tribes, believes that culture-based education is promising for Native Americans, many of whom haven't done well in conventional schools.



Volunteer Nellie Curley works with Sky Yazzie, 6, right, on a math game at the Navajo Language Immersion School, where children are taught in English and in Navajo.

—Christopher Powers/Education Week

“When you talk about an extended family in the Native American community, you talk about clans and tribes,” he said. “What some of these schools are doing is creating a new kind of extended family that includes parents, students, teachers, school administrators, and the leaders of the community. They work as a group, as a part of this extended family, to make sure that the students do well.”

For culture-based schools to survive, they have to pay close attention to state standards, said Jim Barta, an associate professor in elementary education at Utah State University, in Logan, who has studied how to make mathematics culturally relevant for Native American students.

But he also lamented the failure of many other public schools to integrate the culture of students and their communities into the curriculum.

“We have minority kids, Native Americans in particular, who are at the bottom of the list in terms of national data in realizing math potential,” Mr. Barta said. “If our culture-less instruction worked, we wouldn’t be having this problem.”

## **Parental Support**

Parents say they are sorry about the loss of the Navajo language in their own generation and are happy their children are helping to revitalize it. While many schools on the reservation teach a class in Navajo language and culture, Tséhootsooí Diné Bi’ólta’ is the only Navajo-immersion school. Some think the school is the Navajo Nation’s best chance to save the language.

But parents are also concerned about student achievement.

## **Along With Praise, a Note of Caution**

*Window Rock, Ariz.*

While the Navajo Language Immersion School’s blend of traditional culture and modern assessment enjoys widespread community support, its popularity is by no means universal. Delphine Chief is one dissenter. [Listen to an interview with Chief](#) .

A Navajo and a devout Baptist who home-schools her four youngest children, Ms. Chief said that in teaching the Navajo language, teachers often convey traditional Navajo beliefs that she contends are contrary to her family’s Christian faith.

“I don’t have any belief in it,” she said of the ceremonies that are an important part of Navajo culture and spiritual practice, and which Ms. Chief said often are featured in a Navajo-language classroom.

Ms. Chief, who lives in Window Rock, a few miles from the school, said her children get enough exposure to the Navajo language through their church and interaction with a grandparent. She and her husband, Wally Chief, speak Navajo with their children about 5 percent of the time, she said.

One of her sons, who is 15, attends Window Rock High School and takes a Navajo-language class there. Ms. Chief would rather that he didn't and said she warns him not to put stock in any "myths" that he might be taught.

But Marilyn Begay, who teaches 5th graders at the immersion school, said some parents confuse culture with religion.

"Religion is ceremonies and songs and prayers," Ms. Begay said. "We don't do that here [in a public school]."

Since language and culture are linked, she describes ceremonies to the students. "Usually, I tell them, if you are Christian, I'm just telling you about this; I'm not telling you that you have to do this," Ms. Begay said. "That way I'm safe."

She also said that some Christian families send their children to the immersion school and see its value in reinforcing children's self-identity.

**—Mary Ann Zehr**

When Laurinda Davis Moore first looked into enrolling one of her daughters, Lailauni, now 13 and in 7th grade, she worried about whether it would be too demanding for the girl to study in two languages. "I spoke with the principal," Ms. Moore recalled. "She said, 'Don't worry. Their test scores are quite good.' "

She and her husband, James Moore, now have four children enrolled in the school. Both parents are high school graduates of Window Rock schools and wish they had had a chance to learn Navajo in school when they were young. Ms. Moore speaks fluently in English and Navajo, but regrets that she never learned to read and write in Navajo. Mr. Moore grew up speaking only English and said his children are helping him learn Navajo.

Ms. Moore said the school reinforces her family's interest in keeping up Navajo traditions. For example, the family held a traditional Navajo-language puberty ceremony for Lailauni at the sheep camp owned by Ms. Moore's family.

Nancy Yazzie, another parent, said she has monitored the achievement of her daughter, Shandiin, now a 5th grader, in the Navajo school. Shandiin read at below

grade level in English in 3rd grade, she said. Ms. Yazzie was concerned, but by the middle of 4th grade, Shandiin was once again reading on grade level.

### **Emphasizing Standards**

Teachers who use Navajo in their instruction also have been teaching their fair share of state content standards. They decide each year which will be taught in Navajo and which in English at each grade level.

Marilyn Begay, who teaches several subjects to the school's 5th graders only in Navajo, has been helping students improve in "mental math," an area that has been identified as a weakness of all students on the AIMS.



Kindergarten teacher Pat Johnson beats a drum while her students perform a traditional two-step dance during class on a recent day at the Navajo-immersion school. Kindergartners and 1st graders receive all of their instruction in Navajo.

—Christopher Powers/Education Week

Two recent mornings in a row, she started the day by having her students try to solve a word problem. They worked from a problem written in English, but class discussion was in Navajo.

Ms. Begay's block of time for literacy instruction on one of those mornings reflected many of the kinds of activities that would occur in a class in English as a second language—except that, in this case, the second language is Navajo.

Most of the 5th graders test at the low-intermediate level in spoken Navajo, which means it is hard for them to discuss some subjects fluently in class, Ms. Begay said.

She read the children a story about a sheep herder who is bothered by a *gólízhii*, or skunk. She taught them vocabulary and had them practice pronunciation of vowels. The children read the story aloud to each other in pairs and then wrote paragraphs on their own. Lastly, Ms. Begay had the students test themselves on how fast they could read another story about a skunk.

Timed readings are an important part of the benchmark tests the students take three times a year in math, reading, and writing. Teachers say the results of those tests, given in Navajo or English, depending on the grade, and introduced three years ago by outside researchers, are a good predictor of how well the students do on the AIMS.

Staying true to the immersion school's mission, Sherri Miller, who teaches social studies, reading, and writing in English to 7th and 8th graders, chose Navajo beliefs about sickness and healing as a theme for her lessons on a recent day.

She designed learning activities around a Jan. 21 article in *The Denver Post* about Ronnie Tallman, a Navajo who joined the U.S. Marines and then wanted to obtain conscientious-objector status so he could leave the military and become a medicine man, or healer.

Ms. Miller read the article to a class of 7th graders, and they then read a section about Navajo medicine men in a textbook.

In addition to its cultural component, Ms. Miller's lesson aimed to teach specific skills, as she had the students browse opinions on the "talkback" section of the newspaper's Web site about Mr. Tallman and copy down five "strong statements."

In meetings with teachers and other staff members, Ms. Miller had learned that the school's students did poorly on the persuasive-writing section of the AIMS. Her lesson focused on that type of writing.

### **Special Circumstances**

Even some of those who admire the achievements of Tséhootsooí Diné Bi'ólta' caution that the results may be difficult to replicate.

John L. McIntosh, the principal of the 527-student Window Rock Elementary School—which failed to make AYP with a similar population—agreed that the immersion school’s performance shows that a bilingual approach can work. But the fact that it has fewer special education students put it in a better position to make AYP than other Window Rock elementary schools, he said.

Delia Pompa, the vice president for education for the National Council of La Raza, a Washington-based Latino advocacy group that runs a network for charter schools, sees a connection, though, between culturally relevant curricula and school success. “If you use relevance as a big umbrella, you can’t leave out culture and be successful,” Ms. Pompa said. “We need to look at culture in broader terms, beyond ethnic culture. We need to look at culture as inclusive of community values and of youth culture.”

In the Window Rock school system, tools such as surveys have informed the district about what local parents want for their children’s education.

“Right now, our states set the standards; we don’t,” said Jennifer Wilson, the federal-projects coordinator for the district. “But here, because we are on the Navajo Nation, we are teaching our children through the culture and language.”

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