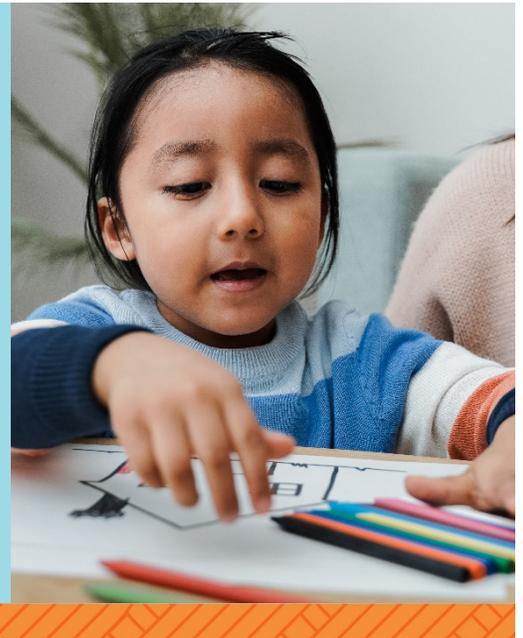


# Ojibwe Language Revitalization in Early Childhood in Minnesota

## *Progress, Programs, and Challenges*



## Introduction

In 2022, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) received a private grant to explore how early childhood Ojibwe language and culture programs could be scaled up, with financial and governance support from state government agencies. Wilder Research was contracted by MDE to research: the process of reclaiming Indigenous culture and language, how it is embedded into early childhood programs in Minnesota, how the state can deepen their understanding, and how state government agencies may play a supportive role. The research included collaboration with three Ojibwe early education programs, noted with a flower in the programs and partners section, who are infusing Ojibwe culture and language in three distinct ways, and was supplemented with 12 interviews with 15 respondents listed in the acknowledgements, and a literature review.

The programs described in this report are part of a robust and growing ecosystem of early childhood programs and organizations that support those programs. The goal of this report is to provide guidance to state agencies about how they can collaborate with Tribes and support the entire ecosystem of early childhood Ojibwe language and culture revitalization efforts. This report provides findings and recommendations from Wilder's research, including:

- A brief summary of the history of Ojibwemowin and loss as a primary language.
- A description of current Ojibwe early childhood programs, the organizations and programs that support them, and the challenges those programs face.
- Potential next steps state government agencies can take to collaborate with Tribes using appropriate government-to-government mechanisms and other opportunities for state agencies to support a robust ecosystem for early childhood Ojibwe language and culture revitalization. This preliminary study reflects a range of opinions and viewpoints from partners from different parts of the ecosystem. More work is needed to gain consensus about how to move forward in a good way.

# History & progress

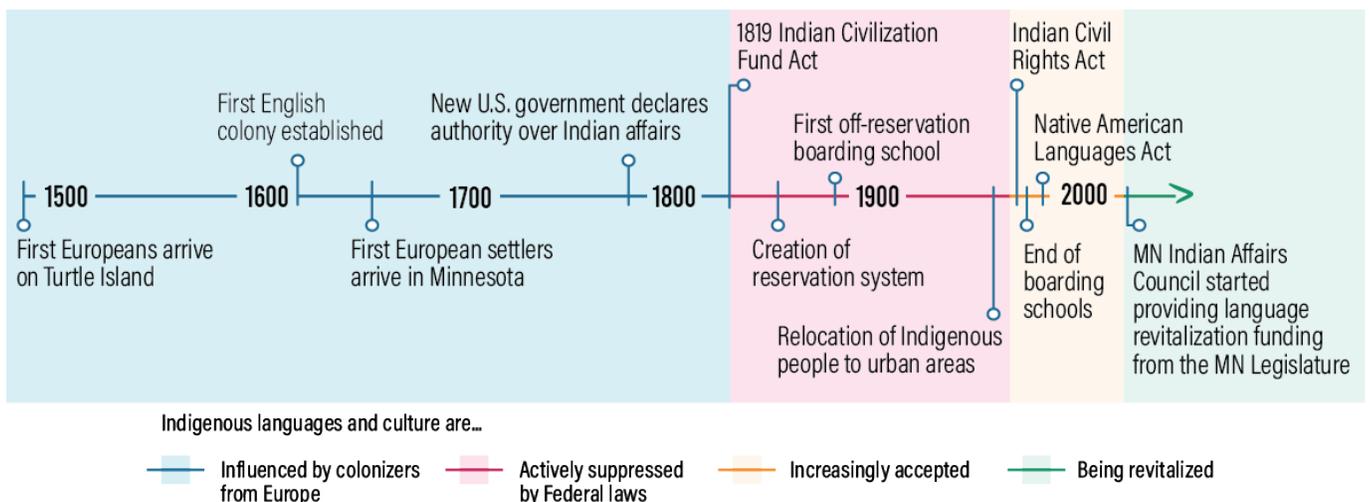
## The need for Indigenous language revitalization

*The Ojibwe language is where we turn for philosophy, history, science, medicines, stories, and spirituality. It is our university and the key to our cultural survival. - Ojibwe People's Dictionary*

The importance of language preservation and revitalization cannot be understated. “[W]hen a language dies, the human heritage, local history and ancestral knowledge disappear with it” (UNESCO, 2023). Ojibwemowin is a Central Algonquin language spoken in North America and parts of Canada by the Anishinaabe peoples. It is endangered despite emerging revitalization efforts ((TPT, 2020; Hermes, 2023). Ojibwemowin reflects and incorporates the worldview of the Anishinaabe, including values, beliefs, and practices (Chiblow & Meighan, 2021).

The erasure of Indigenous language and culture are rooted in a traumatic history of brutal and systematic oppression. Genocide, colonization, and oppressive policies and practices contributed immensely to language loss among Indigenous peoples. The policy with the presumed greatest impact on language loss was that of Indian boarding schools where the use of Ojibwemowin and other Indigenous languages was forbidden (Twin Cities Public Television (TPT), 2020). Only about 1,000 people speak Ojibwemowin in the United States, the majority of whom are elders (TPT, 2020; Hermes, 2023).

Although Ojibwemowin is endangered, Ojibwe early learning programs are one way it is being revitalized throughout Minnesota and the region. Critical to the continuation and transmission of Anishinaabe peoples’ culture, wisdom, and history, Ojibwemowin also plays an essential role in healing from a history of oppression, persecution, and present day injustices.



Sources: Bureau of Indian Affairs (2023), Indian Land Tenure Foundation (2018), and National Congress of American Indians (2020)

Influenced by colonizers from Europe	Actively suppressed by Federal laws	Increasingly accepted	Being revitalized
1492 First Europeans arrive on Turtle Island	1819 Indian Civilization Fund Act	1968 Indian Civil Rights Act	2003 Minnesota Indian Affairs Council started providing language revitalization funding from the Minnesota Legislature
1607 First English colony established	1851 Creation of reservation system	1972 End of boarding schools	
1731 First European settlers arrive in Minnesota	1879 First off-reservation boarding school	1990 Native American Languages Act	
1776 New U.S. government declares authority over Indian affairs	1958 Relocation of Indigenous people to urban areas		

## Programs and partners

Minnesota-based early childhood Ojibwe language and culture programs, and the organizations that support them.

The availability of early childhood Ojibwe language and culture programs is limited. Currently, most American Indian children (including enrolled Tribal members and decedents) in Minnesota do not have access to such programs. Known programs for children under 6 are noted below, although this list may not be comprehensive. The three collaborative Ojibwe early education programs involved in this research are noted with the flower graphic. These programs have varying approaches to providing language and cultural experiences for children, including:

- Early childhood care and education programs that offer some exposure to Ojibwe language or culture
- Fully immersive language programs for children up to age six where they are cared for and taught by qualified early childhood teachers who speak Ojibwemowin
- Fully immersive language programs for children and their caregivers where staff support families linguistically but children remain under the care of their primary caregiver

In addition, there are K-12 schools and programs in Minnesota that offer Ojibwe immersion programs or some exposure to Ojibwe language and culture, Dakota immersion and language and culture programs, and tribally-led or community-based language programs that may be accessible to families with young children that are not part of an early childhood education program. These types of programs are not covered by this report but are important to the Indigenous language revitalization ecosystem in Minnesota.

### Language development in early childhood

Early childhood is a great place for language immersion. It's the time for kids to learn the language. There's not good options for families to continue that in K-12. So kids learn and then they lose it all. It might be easier for them to pick it up again later, since it's hardwired when they learn it in early childhood. That's the magic. But being able to continue it thru the K-12 system would continue the magic but it needs to start in the early childhood space.

That's the big opportunity.

– Angela Delille, Minnesota Department of Human Services

## Leech Lake Early Childhood - Maajiigin Family Center

Maajiigin Family Center is an Ojibwe land-based child care at Leech Lake Reservation that is working to build a teaching and learning community dedicated to speaking Ojibwe. They provide fee-based child care for infants and toddlers for families who are working or going to school. Maajiigin Family Center is dedicated to Ojibwe culture and language through: 1) access to Ojibwe cultural knowledge, skills, and language for families, staff, and children in the community; and 2) traditional seasonal teachings and exposure to Indigenous foods within an outdoor learning space called Megwayaak.

## Fond du Lac Tribal College Gookonaanig Endaawaad (Grandma's House)

Gookonaanig Endaawaad (Grandma's House) restores Ojibwe heritage by immersing families with children ages 0-5 in their language and culture. The program includes four parts. In every part, Ojibwe-speaking staff and elder first-speakers focus on language immersion, outdoor learning, traditional ecological knowledge, and food sovereignty.

- **Community Outreach** assists families who have lost touch with their heritage. An outreach specialist works with them in their homes and in small groups for one year to begin reclaiming their language and cultural identity before entering the more intense immersion environment of Grandma's House.
- **Language Nest** is for caregivers and children ages 0-3 that are more comfortable with the language. In this home-like setting, participants join teachers and elder first-speakers communicating only in Ojibwe four days (24 hours) per week, hearing traditional stories, singing, dancing, making art, and nurturing Grandma's outdoor garden and greenhouse.
- The **immersion classroom** provides an opportunity for children ages 3-5 to be in a school-like setting while remaining fully immersed in Ojibwe language and cultural practices. Children enjoy lessons and activities in both an attractive, well-equipped indoor classroom and outdoors with a lead teacher and teaching assistant.
- **The internship program** is for selected high school students, college students, and other young adults, including parents, to assist at Grandma's House, preparing class materials, joining outdoor activities, and cooking Ojibwe foods, while learning about traditional child rearing practices and advancing their language skills.

## Wicoie Nandagikendan Early Childhood Urban Immersion Project

Wicoie Nandagikendan Early Childhood Urban Immersion Project in South Minneapolis provides a 3-hour-a-day preschool language immersion experience in both Ojibwe and Dakota. It builds on the integral connections between culture, literacy, and educational attainment. Wicoie Nandagikendan partners with other programs to for language curriculum and bring in fluent speakers.

## Red Lake Nation Waasabiik Ojibwemotaadiwin

Waasabiik Ojibwemotaadiwin provides early education to 3 and 4 year old children at Red Lake Reservation. This program incorporates a cultural-based curriculum grounded in Ojibwe values and an academic foundation rooted in traditional teachings to give every student a rich educational experience inside and outside the classroom.

## Montessori American Indian Childcare Center

Montessori American Indian Childcare Center is in Saint Paul. They provide Montessori preschool and kindergarten experience to 84 American Indian children from 66 families. Although this is a pan-tribal urban program that is not language or culture specific, some Ojibwe language and culture are embedded into the Montessori method that they have modified to be an Indigenous Montessori approach.

## Tribal Head Start/Early Head Start programs

Head Start is a federal program for preschool children from low-income families, and Early Head Start is for babies and toddlers. Head Start /Early Head Start offers children and families a variety of services to meet the needs of both the family and child. Many include language and culture components. There are [21 American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start/Early Head Start sites in Minnesota](#), including programs supported by the following Ojibwe reservations (each program may have multiple sites): Leech Lake, White Earth, Mille Lacs, Red Lake, Fond du Lac, Bois Forte, and Grand Portage.

## Partners and support organizations

In addition to the specific programs above, the following organizations and programs support Ojibwe language and culture programming and instruction. This list is limited to known programs based in Minnesota that specifically support early childhood, acknowledging that the range of the Ojibwe language is much broader than Minnesota's current boundaries.

-  University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development, Ojibwe Scholar Program
- [Midwest Indigenous Immersion Network](#) supports Ojibwe programs through professional development, and material creation.
- [Indigenous Visioning](#) and [All Nations Rise](#) work to support Tribal communities broadly, including early childhood programs, and young Indigenous children and their families. They have curated INDIGEBOX, a box of early childhood tools specific to Ojibwe customs and values that early education programs can subscribe to receive.

- [Minnesota Tribal Resources for Early Childhood Care](#) (MnTRECC) supports Tribal early childhood programs, including resources and guides for Ojibwe language learning ([Ojibwe Curriculum Kit](#)) (PDF file will open).
- [Grassroots Indigenous Multimedia](#) (GIM) supports language revitalization that includes developing picture books and games, and archiving songs and stories.
- [Ojibwe.net](#) is a site dedicated to maintaining the Anishinaabemowin language, with Ojibwe lessons, stories, and songs.
- [The Ojibwe People's Dictionary](#) is a talking dictionary that integrates photographs and information on Ojibwe culture and ways of life.
- [Ayaanikeshkaagewaad Language Revitalization](#) program for immersion educators at White Earth Reservation.

There are also numerous Ojibwe courses and programs at higher education institutions in Minnesota, including at Tribal, public, and private colleges and universities. People seeking careers in early childhood education would need a second degree or credential in early childhood to teach in Ojibwe language early childhood programs. One exception is Lac Courte Orielles Ojibwe University (LCOOU), which currently provides Early Childhood license and certificate programs, and is in the final development stages of a 4-year elementary licensure program. Several of these education courses will be offered in Ojibwemowin to further prepare prospective Ojibwe immersion educators.

## State funding for early childhood language revitalization

While there is not a specific source of funding for early childhood language revitalization, there are state grant programs that have been or potentially could be used to support these types of programs. The table below summarizes existing funding sources for language revitalization, child care, early childhood development, or community action funding. Of note, the two language revitalization funding sources (noted with a flower graphic) are not specific to early childhood.

Funding stream	What it's for	Notes
<a href="#">Child Care Assistance Program</a> (DCYF)	Providing eligible families with assistance to pay for child care at licensed or certified child care program.	Families can use their payment for Indigenous language programs if the program is also a licensed or certified child care program.
<a href="#">Community Solutions for Healthy Child Development Grants</a> (MDH)	Improving child development outcomes and reducing racial disparities.	Competitive grant program last awarded in 2024.
<a href="#">Early Childhood Family Education</a> through school districts (DCYF)	Strengthening and empowering families with children birth through kindergarten using parent education.	ECFE can be offered in non-English languages.
<a href="#">Early Learning Scholarships</a> , which includes a Tribal set-aside (DCYF)	Providing scholarships for eligible families to pay for high-quality child care and early education.	Families can use their scholarships for Indigenous language programs if the program also meets the criteria of being high-quality child care.
<a href="#">Family Home Visiting</a> (several individual grant programs through MDH)	Implementing home visiting programs.	
<a href="#">Family, Friend and Neighbor Grant Program</a> (DCYF)	Supporting family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) caregivers	A competitive grant program last awarded in 2023. Indigenous language programs can use to recruit, train, and support FFN caregivers in providing language and culture programming.
<a href="#">Great Start Compensation Support Payment Program</a>	Supplementing the monthly income of licensed and certified child care programs.	Indigenous language programs are eligible if the program is also a licensed or certified child care program.
<a href="#">Minnesota Indian Affairs Council's Dakota and Ojibwe Language Revitalization Grant</a> 	Preserving Dakota and Ojibwe Indian language; Fostering education and immersion programs in Dakota and Ojibwe language.	A competitive grant program last awarded in 2023. For educational institutions, nonprofits, and Tribal nations.
<a href="#">Native Language Revitalization Grants to Schools</a> (MDE) 	Providing language instruction in Dakota and Anishinaabe languages or another language indigenous in school settings.	A competitive grant program last awarded in 2024. For school districts, charter schools, and Tribal Contract schools in Minnesota.
<a href="#">Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education</a> (SNAP-Ed) (DCYF)	Providing culturally-centered education about nutrition and physical activity.	Tribal programming includes language as a part of the nutritional education component.
<a href="#">Whole Family Systems Initiative</a> (DHS)	Improving the health and well-being of children and their families, especially in communities of color facing significant adversities and disparities.	Competitive grant program last awarded in 2019 (a 5-year grant).



## Opportunities and challenges

### Barriers to early childhood Ojibwe language learning

The following are challenges that leaders with the aforementioned programs and partners identified in implementing early childhood Ojibwe language and culture programs. Addressing these challenges and building the opportunities identified can help programs be sustained and successful, and support the growth of new programs and the strengthening of the ecosystem of early childhood Ojibwe language and culture programs, which fits within the broader ecosystem of Ojibwe language and cultural revitalization efforts across the age spectrum.

### Limited collaboration and partnership

Currently, language revitalization, especially at the early childhood level, is being done by various programs and organizations. Fabulous work is happening, however, without a comprehensive plan and consistent funding there will continue to be limited access to high quality Ojibwe language and culture instruction to develop proficient Ojibwe speakers. In addition, the ecosystem of early childhood Ojibwe language and culture programs could be supported by also strengthening and supporting Ojibwe language and culture programming in K-12 and postsecondary and within community.

A comprehensive ecosystem of Ojibwe language and culture programs should acknowledge and support a range of approaches and types of programs that are working toward the goal of Ojibwe language revitalization. Not every kid or family can commit to a complete immersion setting and some families may be uncomfortable participating in a full immersion program if they cannot support their children at home. Despite research to the contrary, some parents and community members may be concerned about negative impacts of time spent on learning a second language that could or should be spent focusing on other academic topics, such as math or reading (in English). In fact, research shows that bilingual children have stronger cognitive development, social-emotional development, and readiness for learning, and that they are more likely to experience long-term success (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

In addition, many programs may struggle to provide complete immersion due to the limited supply of fluent or highly proficient Ojibwemowin instructors. It is important to provide access to a range of programs and offerings to ensure all families' needs and preferences are met. Furthermore, each Nation or American Indian community may have their own approach and structure that should be designed with their capacity and the needs of their community in mind.

*There is a need for immersion, but also the tension between everyday life and how parents who are involve contend with navigating everyday life, when not in an immersion setting. How do you create space for proficiency to grow? What adds to the tension, too, is the lack of proficient speakers. Elders are passing away; the language isn't being taken on by younger generations to continue it. – Jovon Perry, Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families*

## Staffing

Early childhood Ojibwe programs face challenges finding teachers that are both proficient in Ojibwe and licensed to teach in early childhood settings. Instead, they are recruiting among the following groups:



**Formally trained and licensed early childhood educators.** Early childhood programs that are licensed by the State or Tribe typically require their educators to have training and credentials related to early childhood education. Although some of these individuals may be Ojibwe language learners, there are few incentives or opportunities for them to increase their proficiency in Ojibwe.



**Proficient and fluent Ojibwe speakers.** First language speakers are often elders, or highly proficient or fluent second language learners who have invested significant time and effort to growing their language skills. These individuals are rarely licensed early childhood educators, and if they are still in the job market, the demand for their skills is high across a range of settings including K-12, postsecondary and other community-based settings that all may offer higher pay and an easier working environment than early childhood program

It is a real challenge for early childhood Ojibwe language and culture programs to hire and retain licensed early childhood educators who are also proficient in Ojibwemowin. Licensed early childhood educators who are language learners have few opportunities to learn and practice language for increased proficiency and utility in early childhood settings. Programs are often not able to offer professional development time to allow these educators to be away from the classroom to attend formal language learning programs at a sufficient dosage to obtain a high degree of proficiency or fluency.

*Just because you are a language speaker, doesn't mean you know how to engage with children and be that language model... There's always been this problem and again there needs to be that holistic balance in who that teacher can be. . . . There is the linguistic path of learning Ojibwe and then there needs to be a parallel path that is the path of becoming a language learner and learning to teach this language. – Lucy Arias, Minnesota Department of Education*

The early childhood education field, in general, is plagued with low wages and frequent staff turnover. (Minnesota's [Great Start Compensation Support Payment Program](#) seeks to address this industry-wide challenge.) In addition, few or no incentives or accommodations are offered to early childhood educators as they increase their proficiency in Ojibwe language and culture. They do not get credit toward licensure or pay increases with that increased skillset. Early childhood Ojibwe language and culture programs may lack the time and resources to invest in their staff members'

language learning when they are constantly understaffed and dealing with high turnover. Also, when an educator does increase their Ojibwemowin proficiency, they are in high demand across a range of settings including K-12, postsecondary, and community-based programs.

*Elders fluent in the Ojibwe language are limited and sought after by many to pass on the language tradition. – Jovon Perry, Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families*

*As soon as they get their degree and become proficient, they leave for better pay and easier jobs. Work with existing early childhood teachers who want to be there, who want to be an early childhood teacher. Nurture them into learning commands and simple conversation they can build on. – Barb Fabre, Indigenous Visioning and All Nations Rise*

## Lack of Ojibwe language and culture resources, curricula, and assessment

While some Ojibwe language materials and resources exist (noted above), there is not a standard curriculum and teaching resources are limited in Ojibwe specifically for early childhood. Unlike the other topics that are taught in early childhood settings where materials, guidance, and training is provided to educators, Ojibwe language and culture early childhood educators are faced with the pressures of caring for a group of young children, while simultaneously being expected to develop and implement Ojibwe language and culture activities, curriculum, and assessments. Furthermore, they are expected to do this in a language that they are just learning.

Having a curriculum and related resources and materials would allow early childhood Ojibwe language and culture programs to move beyond teaching of vocabulary words to incorporating key phrases and grammar to scaffolding teaching with practice and activation of the language to complete lessons in Ojibwemowin. This approach to language instruction is more likely to lead to increased language proficiency of the students over time. However, before a curriculum can even be developed, there has to be some agreement among the intended users of the curriculum about the learning goals, standards, and expectations for each level. The curriculum should then be designed with those goals, standards, and expectations in mind.

Similarly, there is not currently a way to assess a young child's language skill or fluency in Ojibwemowin. Early literacy experts suggest assessing children's language development more holistically and dynamically, so using a standard written test is not recommended. However, there is a lack of highly proficient Ojibwemowin speakers and inadequate lack of access to a rigorous assessment training process that would allow for a more dynamic and holistic assessment process in most settings, for both adult and child language learners.

A couple of the experts who we interviewed suggested that Ojibwemowin programs should be trained in and use the Center for Applied Linguistics' Student Oral Proficiency Assessment ([SOPA](#)) for PreK-grade 8 and Early Language Listening and Oral Proficiency Assessment (ELLOPA) for

PreK-grade 2. The PreLAS is another assessment tool that was mentioned as a possibility if it could be translated into Ojibwe.

Assessing the language proficiency of educators is a related challenge. Under the current system, there is not enough data available about the language and content proficiency of educators. For [PreK-12 American Indian Language, History, and Culture teaching licenses](#) in Minnesota, Tribes must provide a letter of support (“eminence credential”) for educators who they believe are experts in their language, culture, and/or history. However, it is unclear what process Tribes use to assess educators’ knowledge or expertise in these topics. There is not a similar credentialing process available in the early childhood space. It would be useful to have a tool that would help ecosystem learn more about and support the growth of early childhood Indigenous language and culture educators’ capabilities. One expert we interviewed suggested using the [ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview \(OPI\) process](#). The experts who suggested using these types of assessments (and other key informants who we interviewed) also recommended, as noted in other places in this report as well, that educators should be compensated accordingly for increased language and culture proficiencies.

*It's impossible to understand the status of these educators' capabilities without consistent measures and expectations for licensing, as well as teaching and learning. But, if we did have data, we could identify that the highly proficient speakers with licenses are unicorns, and we should shower them with gifts to keep them around! – Gimiwan (Dustin Burnette), Midwest Indigenous Immersion Network*

Experts who work in the field have mixed opinions about a standard curriculum and assessment process, in part because standardization may not effectively measure actual language learning. A standard assessment tool may also fail to reflect regional variations in the Ojibwe language and cultural teachings, which would prevent local communities from setting their own goals and assessment approaches for assessing language learning.

*The work needs to start with what you are working towards, what are the expectations or standards. Then you develop the curriculum to reach those standards. – Gimiwan (Dustin Burnette), Midwest Indigenous Immersion Network*

*We need to (re)think how we think about standards and assessments, because those are not good measurements of abilities or progression for language learners. What needs to stop happening is having very concrete ways of looking at children’s language abilities and their progression. It needs to be a more dynamic system that really understands the dynamic nature of language learning. . . . If you have a classroom that is not speaking in full sentences or using the right conjugation, you then look at what the children are talking about. There are other ways of measuring things than these concrete ways and looking at it holistically. – Lucy Arias, Minnesota Department of Education*

## Historical trauma

For many Ojibwe people, efforts to revitalize the language sparks mixed feelings. Older generations of Ojibwes were shamed or punished for speaking Ojibwemowin, first in boarding schools and then by their own families and communities who learned to suppress their traditions due to the stigma they felt from the broader society. In addition, some Ojibwes may feel embarrassed that

they do not know their native language, and some may have experienced shaming by others in their own community for not using the language “correctly.” Any effort to revitalize the Ojibwe language and culture within early childhood programs needs to acknowledge that some community members may re-live trauma or may feel some resistance or apprehension about Ojibwe language and culture programs due to the trauma they experienced.

*A Tribal elder used one of our stories, I asked him which words are right – he said “they are all right, depends on who created that version, use what the majority in your community uses.” He believes it came from somewhere and he’s not the person to say it’s wrong. Some people are out there always trying to correct people. It’s a turn off. I share that when they correct me too much. Creating an “upper class” of Anishinaabe, and that’s trauma. Re-traumatizing people. I heard that from a Tribal leader that had that happen.*  
– Barb Fabre, *Indigenous Visioning and All Nations Rise*

*You have to deal with the trauma of the 40 year old who never got a chance to learn their language. . . . It’s not a secret how to get it done. We have to fight through the trauma of what people have experienced and deal with their actual real world busy lives.*  
– Margaret Noodin, *Grand Portage Head Start*

## Inconsistent funding

To date, early childhood Ojibwe language and culture programs have been reliant on varied and inconsistent funding streams, including many short-term grant programs through the Minnesota Departments of Children, Youth, and Families; Education; Health; and Human Services, as well as philanthropic funders. This creates instability; language learning is not a short-term endeavor. Being a language learner requires a lifetime commitment. Creating a sustainable ecosystem that supports Ojibwemowin learning across the lifespan will require significant resources and time to undo the hundreds of years and multiple layers of effort that was put in to eliminating it.

*The 5-year Whole Family Systems grant has been amazing. I appreciate respect for using our funds in creative ways. I appreciate that 5 years is longer than most grants, but probably not enough. . . . the 5 years in Indigenous country almost feels like a setup because it feels like we are now flipping things so much, getting in a groove, and now this funding will be done. It is our largest funding source. Five years isn’t enough for a program to get establishing.*  
– Gaagigegizhigook (Nicole Kneeland), *Grandma’s Nest at Fond du Lac*



## Moving forward

What state government agencies, Tribes, early childhood programs, and supporting community-based organizations can do to support Indigenous language and culture revitalization in the early childhood space

To revitalize Indigenous languages and cultures among young children, families need support from a comprehensive ecosystem of learning resources and opportunities that meet the needs of diverse Indigenous language and culture learners. For example, some families need full-day child care and will be happy to have their child exposed to some Indigenous language and culture throughout their

day. Other families want to commit to immersing their children in their Indigenous language and culture and they are able to have at least one parent participate with the child in a part-time immersion program. All Indigenous families should have access to the resources they need to learn their language and culture at the level they are starting from and in the format that best meets their needs and fits into their daily lives. Although some experts have seen huge impacts of immersion programs on language acquisition among children regardless of what else happens in their home or community to support language use, other experts see the need for community-wide language revitalization supports and language programming access. In the words of one interviewee:

*The language is not isolated to the classroom. You cannot depend on books. It has to feel good to use it. I can come up with a curriculum where I create a bilingual environment to create literacy, with scaffolding for the grammar and words to learn both languages, but if children don't hear the language around them at home and in the community all the effort is almost worthless. – Margaret Noodin, Grand Portage Head Start*

Tribes and American Indian communities should lead efforts to revitalize their own languages and cultures. State agencies should provide support and resources but let Tribes and American Indian-led community-based organizations lead the efforts and allow them to customize the approach and programs for their own community's needs, preferences, and capacity.

*Localized effort needs to be respected and not prohibited by the state and be led by those communities. – Janice LaFloe, Montessori American Indian Childcare Center*

*Tribal nations and Indigenous people know best. Their needs and resources, and the best path forward for language revitalization. It is the state's job to support those plans. Make sure that we are actively listening and continuing to make the funding streams that we do have flexible enough to accommodate the ways in which Tribes are saying they want us to partner. – Jovon Perry, Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families*

Below are a series of suggested strategies for ways state agencies can support Tribal-led efforts to revitalize Indigenous languages and cultures. These recommendations are based on a synthesis of the interviews and other information we have gathered throughout this project. We encourage the State of Minnesota, through its new Department of Children, Youth and Families and other agencies, to work with other agencies and with Tribal Nations and American Indian community-based organizations to work toward a collaborative plan to address these and other potential solutions to strengthen the ecosystem of early childhood Indigenous language and culture revitalization.

This report is focused on early childhood Ojibwe language and culture programs, because the Minnesota Department of Education partnered with Wilder and three Ojibwe language and culture programs as part of the grant-funded research. However, we believe that many of the recommendations included here are also applicable to Dakota, Ho-Chunk, and other Indigenous language and culture revitalization efforts. More discussion is needed with Tribes and experts to identify possible differences in gaps, challenges, and solutions across the range of American Indian communities in Minnesota.

## Strategies for growing the workforce of early childhood educators proficient in an Indigenous language

**Support early childhood educators in learning Indigenous languages** through on-the-job training, and through subscriptions for language learning resources or apprenticeships with First Speakers. This could be considered as part of an early childhood apprenticeship through the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry. Early childhood educators need an opportunity to practice and learn their Indigenous language as part of their regular workday as on-the-job training. Early childhood educators should have access to resources like Rosetta Stone subscriptions so they can continue to grow their language skills. Finally, when possible, early childhood educators should be paired with First Speakers to help them on their language learning journey.

*If we want teachers to teach our children, they don't need to be proficient but they need to know words the children can relate to. You might scare off teachers if you tell them you need them to be proficient. – Barb Fabre, Indigenous Visioning and All Nations Rise*

*I don't have enough people to talk with and practice. I always wanted to have at least two people at one site so they could have one other adult to work on. . . . It's not like a training or professional development. It's the in-context use. Which you aren't going to get from a pull-out thing in 1-hour. – Fong (Mary Hermes), University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development*

*When we first opened, we had a language revitalization grant and that helped pair me with two language speakers. I am a language learner and they are more fluent than I am, so that relationship was really helpful in the beginning. They role modeled how to speak and that was really helpful. – Janice LaFloe, Montessori American Indian Childcare Center*

*We need more regional and locally driven workshops and practice opportunities for teaching staff to get out of the classroom and feed their souls. – Margaret Noodin, Grand Portage Head Start*

**Provide increased pay for early childhood educators** as they increase their proficiency in their Indigenous language. This could be accomplished through increased hourly wages or a bonus structure, and could be considered as part of the early childhood wage scale currently under development. This would create more incentives particularly for early childhood educators who have Indigenous language skills and/or an interest in learning their Indigenous language to apply for and be retained in open positions. One of the collaborators involved in this research, Gookonaanig Endaawaad (Grandma's House), already provides pay increases and tuition support to help staff increase their proficiency in Ojibwe language and culture.

*The state could put forward a huge incentive to say a BA is fine, and BA with Ojibwe with language certification pays as much as a certified teacher. If they get certification to get the pay bump, they are probably going to work at an elementary rather than a Head Start because it pays more. If you have a language trainer on site, you could pay people more to do that. – Fong (Mary Hermes), University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development*

*I am not a teacher but if I go get my license and then get a specialized certificate that allows my employer to advertise that we have this special program, I should get extra money. I should get something more than what I was getting as a regular teacher. If you are an EC teacher that's already a specialized skillset but then if you have Ojibwe proficiency it's an added layer of specialization. If we don't support EC teachers how do we expect our children to come out of school with what they need. – Melanie Franks, Minnesota Department of Education*

*Immersion teachers should get paid even more. Our language is at stake, the pressure is up, and everyone knows that. Being bilingual and using both those parts of your brain plus being a teacher is exhausting. So being paid more and more support in the classroom would encourage more people to pursue it. - Skyler Kuczaboski, Minnesota Indian Affairs Council*

*That would be great if there was an assessment for level of [language] proficiency. Someone was given some type of language certification through a board of fluent speakers. It would be great if teachers could get more pay, as they are working toward increased Ojibwe proficiency. It's hard work, they should get incentive pay for that. – Wezaawibines (Wayne Somes), MAHUBE-OTWA Community Action Partnership*

*The first five years is when the child's brain is developing, when everything happens. Those are the people that should be paid extremely high. – Gaagigegiizhigook (Nicole Kneeland), Grandma's Nest at Fond du Lac*

**Create an educational pathway** for people who are both interested in learning an Indigenous language and becoming early childhood educators to pursue both tracks in one program, as is being done at University of Minnesota, Center for Education and Human Development, including the allowance of credit transfer from Tribal colleges. Higher education programs could also offer non-degree seeking courses for Indigenous language speakers to obtain an early childhood credential, such that they are eligible to work in these programs.

*Best thing is to work with several postsecondary options thru tribes or other institutions to develop licensing programs that represent the need we're identifying. – Gimiwan (Dustin Burnette), Midwest Indigenous Immersion Network*

*The bachelor program with the University of Minnesota is creating these professionals or language learners to come back to the community to lead language immersion preschool programs. More efforts along those lines would go a long way. – Lucy Arias, Minnesota Department of Education*

*This would be a great opportunity for college students, to learn [Ojibwe] before they get into the classroom. It's harder to do these types of initiatives with teachers in the classrooms because they don't have time during the week. – Barb Fabre, Indigenous Visioning and All Nations Rise*

**Create career pathways from Indigenous language immersion programs.** Where possible, recruit parents of former immersion students and former K-12 immersion students themselves to become early childhood educators. For example, Gookonaanig Endaawaad (Grandma's House) has staff who are alumni from Wadookodaading at Lac Courte Orielles in Wisconsin who entered the early education workforce with a high degree of Ojibwe proficiency. Before becoming licensed educators, they can work as classroom aides or other support staff. This is known as the “grow your own” model, common in native Hawai'ian language programs.

## Strategies for supporting early childhood Indigenous language and culture programs

**Support the ongoing development of Indigenous language and culture activities, resources, and curriculum for early childhood educators and families.** Activities and resources should not be American or European songs and games that are translated into Indigenous languages, but instead should focus on teachings that originate from that Tribe or local community. Given that Indigenous languages were not originally written languages, focusing on oral activities using stories and songs and activities is more culturally aligned than a standard written curriculum.

*[Rather] than a standard curriculum, a well-designed and holistic language learner program. It's about the educator and the supports [provided to] them. A confident and dynamic educator can take any curriculum and run with it. It's really about the supports you give to them. If a teacher knows numbers and basic commands, then the goal is to build on that. And just being a part of who they are as a teacher and building their ability and language abilities. – Lucy Arias, Minnesota Department of Education*

*Yes, [I support continued resources for programs to develop and share their own curriculums]. Instead of trying to fit into the standard, we create the curriculum first and fit the standards in there, and they always do. Thinking Ojibwe or Anishinabe first. Some call it backwards design, what is our end result? And then we work backwards. And then after, we take whatever the requirements are and see where it can fit. – Gaagigezihigook (Nicole Kneeland). Grandma's Nest at Fond du Lac*

*I don't think a Western-type curriculum would be helpful. But something written is needed with high frequency phrases, games, songs, and both teacher/student response. Frameworks that are in line with Ojibwe thinking, seasons, and culture would be a better use of time and much more appropriate for Ojibwemowin. – Fong (Mary Hermes), University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development*

*[Going] thru that extra hoop of translating is exhausting. It would make it so much easier [for early childhood educators] to not have to do the translating for themselves. Just hearing classroom words like "it's time to do \_\_\_\_" - Skyler Kuczaboski, Minnesota Indian Affairs Council*

**Invest in ecosystem strategies for early childhood Indigenous language and culture programs to connect with and support one another and the work of Tribal Nations and American Indian-led initiatives.** As noted above, many programs and partners are already making strides. Working together across Tribes and American Indian-led community-based organizations will ensure language revitalization efforts are comprehensive and linked to a common purpose.

*It would be cool to create programmatic relationships of language programs – a facilitator of learning. – Janice LaFloe, Montessori American Indian Childcare Center*

*Community organizations and nonprofits implementing immersion/Ojibwe programs themselves aligning and partnering with the efforts of Tribal nations provides a stronger and sustainable approach. – Jovon Perry, Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families*

*Some type of networking or conferences... there needs to be a place for teachers to share resources, troubleshoot challenges. I heard there is some connecting happening, but there could be more at the ecosystem level. – Wezaawibines (Wayne Somes), MAHUBE-OTWA Community Action Partnership*

**Support early childhood Indigenous language and culture programs with significant, long-term, and consistent funding**, so programs can hire, train, and grow their staff and programs. Consider ways to capitalize on existing programs and funding streams.

*If we're going to [revitalize the language], let's do it well, not haphazardly. Let's put as many resources in as we did to teaching all Ojibwe kids English in the boarding school era. – Gimiwan (Dustin Burnette), Midwest Indigenous Immersion Network*

*State should recognize their role in the language loss. . . . State funding the language programs is the best route to repair these previous harms. - Skyler Kuczaboski, Minnesota Indian Affairs Council*

*Stop putting up so many barriers to funding. Tribal nations or the people working on Indigenous programming, they know what's best. – Melanie Franks, Minnesota Department of Education*

**Support the recognition of and continued support for high quality early childhood Indigenous language and culture programs** through existing state mechanisms, such as the Parent Aware quality rating and improvement system. The Minnesota Department of Children, Youth and Families should also work with Tribes and other constituencies in this ecosystem to assess the Parent Aware Full-Rating Pathway and the Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPS) to ensure that high-quality Indigenous language and culture programs can meet and are reflected in these standards.

## Strategies for supporting the broader ecosystem of Indigenous language and culture revitalization efforts

While our brains are most able to adapt to new languages in our earliest years, languages will not thrive when taught only to young children. The language needs to be learned and used throughout the family and community, so that language learners can experience it in many contexts and practice it in real life situations. Access to Indigenous language and culture learning opportunities needs to be available for all Indigenous peoples who want it. An ecosystem of Indigenous language and culture programs would ensure that families have access to language learning in a variety of ways and settings, from birth through adulthood, to meet their needs, preferences, and current capacities. This could include: immersion and non-immersion programs from early childhood through postsecondary, online tools, audio and printed resources and activities, and language and culture teachings to individuals and families in a community-based settings. Again, although we have focused in this report on the Ojibwe language and culture revitalization ecosystem in Minnesota, we believe these recommendations may also be applied more broadly to other Indigenous languages and cultures and to regional efforts that go beyond colonizer (state) boundaries.

*What we know about language and revitalization is little kids are the most primed to learn a second language. And doing it alongside their parents and community is truly going to create an ecosystem. . . . Money goes to the kids but what about the parents and whole community? I want the ecosystem to not just be public schools and colleges, but the whole community. – Lucy Arias, Minnesota Department of Education*

*In addition to working with providers, we should work with parents as a team to use Ojibwe vocabulary at home too. If everybody is saying it in Ojibwe around that child, the child will grasp it in no time. INDIGIBOX was developed for exactly this reason. – Barb Fabre, Indigenous Visioning and All Nations Rise*

*Every tribe, school, and community should consider all of [these approaches to language and culture learning in early childhood] and deploy as many of them as they can. No single effort will solve the problems and there is no set of efforts that will work for everyone. It will always be based on community history and dynamics, existing speaker and teacher numbers, willing student numbers, available funding, and available materials. For each entity attempting to do this there are many factors to consider. – Margaret Noodin, Grand Portage Head Start*

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