

To Sustain Native Language Learning, Tribe Turns To A Charter School

By ELSA H. PARTAN

Jessie C. Baird was shopping in a Mashpee supermarket a few weeks ago when she overheard two people greet each other in Wôpanâak, the Wampanoag language. She scurried down the aisle to get a look, but they had moved on before she could see who they were. It was a heart-warming moment for the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe member, who has spent the last 20 years reviving the tongue of her ancestors, a language silent for more than 100 years prior.

“I’ve never had it happen in a public place, where the conversation was going on without me,” Ms. Baird (Little Doe) said.

Since the language project began, more than 400 people of all ages from four Wampanoag communities have taken a class based on the work done by Ms. Baird. Her linguistic journey began with a 1663 translation of the Bible, land deeds, and other colonial-era contracts written in Wôpanâak. She co-founded the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project and created workbooks, vocabulary lists, and grammar guides. About 11 people are fully conversant in Wôpanâak because of Ms. Baird’s work, the community classes, summer

language camps, and their own hours of study. Ms. Baird raised her youngest daughter, Mae, who is 8, to be a native speaker of Wôpanâak. These days, Mae corrects her mother’s grammar.

Now the 49-year-old is taking the next step to ensure that the language lives on. Last month Ms. Baird and a staff of eight began the work of opening a public charter school in the fall of 2015 for kindergarten through grade 3. Students would be taught both in Wôpanâak and English.

“We’ve reached a critical point,” Ms. Baird said. The best way to spread the language is to teach it to children, whose capacity for learning language is at a lifetime peak, she said.

To fund the charter application process, Ms. Baird’s group secured a \$900,000 grant over three years from the federal Administration for Native Americans, enough to pay part-time salaries for nine people. They chose to pursue a charter school because it comes with a well-established funding mechanism through the state and it allows for innovative approaches to education. Further, charter schools have had success in closing the “achievement gap,”

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Jennifer Hardin (left) speaks in Wôpanâak, the Wampanoag language, as Jessie (Little Doe) Baird, sitting across the table, listens and suggests vocabulary. Ms. Hardin, Brian Weeden, Tia Pocknett and Tracy Kelley are training to be teachers and writing curriculum for a proposed Wôpanâak public charter school.

Charter School

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that has been pervasive in disadvantaged populations, according to the grant application.

The group estimates that there will be 183 Wampanoag children from Barnstable County, Plymouth County, Bristol County, and Martha's Vineyard who will be the right age to attend. It assumes that not every child will apply. As a public charter school, admission must be by lottery and open to all.

Charter schools in Massachusetts are funded through state aid taken primarily from the student's home district, called the "sending" district. Last year, that was \$13,655 per Mashpee student. To soften the financial blow, the state covers 100 percent of the per-pupil cost the first year the student leaves. For the following four years, the state gives the sending district a 25 percent reimbursement.

In preparing their charter school application, the small staff faces an enormous task. The process requires a pre-application and a 141-page final application. They must form a board of trustees and write bylaws.

"It's an incredibly rigorous process with an incredible reward at the end," said Marc Kenen, the executive director of Massachusetts Charter Public School Association. "My message is, go forward, but with your eyes open. The bar is very high."

There are currently 77 charter schools operating in Massachusetts. Among those are a handful of immersion, bilingual, or dual language programs, including the Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School and the Academy of the Pacific Rim Charter Public School, which requires Mandarin classes in grades 7 to 12.

The Wôpanâak charter school staff faces a unique hurdle. It must write an entire curriculum in Wôpanâak and explain it in English.

On a recent Tuesday, six future teachers were undertaking the work in earnest around a table in the Summerfield office park. They are tasked with multiple responsibilities, such as writing curriculum, researching how other native language schools work across the country, and, importantly, becoming conversant speakers of the language themselves.

A few of the future teachers have been studying the language for years, but others only started



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Jessie (Little Doe) Baird holds 4-month-old Wesley Greendeer while his mother, Nitana Hicks (standing), works out a phrase in the Wampanoag language, Wôpanâak. Teacher-in-training Eleanor Coombs looks on. Nine staff members are preparing an application for a Wôpanâak public charter school and the curriculum needed for kindergarten through grade 3.

six weeks ago. The newcomers struggled during the four hours of Wôpanâak-only conversation, but rarely did anyone use English, even when they were grasping for a word.

"It feels good," said Eleanor Coombs of Mashpee, one of the less experienced Wôpanâak speakers. "It is different from sitting in a regular classroom. There are some frustrations, but progress comes quickly. It makes my family stronger and connects me with the creator and all my people."

Jennifer Hardin of Bourne, a member of the Herring Pond Wampanoag Tribe, said she hopes that her almost 9-month-old daughter will benefit from the Wôpanâak charter school.

"It's really inspiring to see what Jessie has done," she said, tearing up. "For me to be a part of this is really emotional."

The charter school organizers must answer difficult questions before opening their school's doors. Exactly how much English should be spoken each day will be one of those questions.

To assist them, the group has tapped the expertise of Jennifer C. Weston to be the charter and personnel coordinator. Ms. Weston is a Brown University-educated member of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe who has created a network of 300 tribal language

programs across the country over four years. She was an associate producer for the 2010 PBS series "We Shall Remain" and continues to work part-time for the Cambridge-based advocacy group Cultural Survival.

According to Ms. Weston, studies of language acquisition show that a minimum of 20 hours a week of speaking the target language is necessary for significant learning. "Without that 20 hours a week, there isn't much more than a long list of vocabulary," she said.

The Waadookodaading Ojibwe Immersion School in Hayward, Wisconsin, could be a model for the Wôpanâak charter school. The Wôpanâak group has taken notice, sending its curriculum specialist Nitana Hicks a few weeks ago for a visit. The Ojibwe school is a public charter that opened in 2000 and now has 50 students in preschool to grade 5.

Speaking on the phone from her office this week, Ojibwe school director Brooke M. Ammann said students in the preschool class spend 100 percent of their day speaking Ojibwe. In grade 1, English is increased to 30 minutes a day and from grade 2 to grade 5, students speak 45 minutes of English a day. The rest of the seven-hour day is spent speaking Ojibwe. Ms. Ammann said the Wôpanâak charter school staff should put trust in their culture as they pre-

pare their curriculum.

"You should really use your culture and your teachings as a foundation," she said. "Everything you need to know is already around you. The standards that the outsiders try to impose on us, they are not anything new."

With a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College and a master's in education from Harvard University, Ms. Ammann said her gift to her tribe is translating how the traditional Ojibwe lessons fit into "education speak."

During sugaring season, walking in the woods and tapping the trees is an opportunity for learning at every grade level, Ms. Ammann said.

"There is endless science and math," she said. "There are so many lessons contained in that activity."

Ms. Baird said she is eager to get a board of trustees who can start grappling with the questions of the new school's educational philosophy. Sitting at a table with the future teachers, she said she must also give each staff member extra attention and care as they take on the task of building a school.

"This is a very stressful period," she said. "They feel that the whole nation is counting on them."

"And they are," one of the teachers piped up.

"I'm ready to spread this around," Ms. Baird said.