

# Tséhootsooí Diné Bi'ólta'

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## Program Description

In 1986, the Fort Defiance Elementary School, a school located within the Window Rock Unified School District in Fort Defiance, Arizona, began the Diné-medium (commonly known as immersion) program in a previously English language medium school. Two kindergarten classes were initially started with voluntary participation of those students who demonstrated passive knowledge of Navajo on a language survey (Holm & Holm, 1995). As the years progressed, Diné-medium classrooms were added with increasing grade levels expanding into another elementary school within the district. Kindergarten and first graders received most of their academic instruction in Navajo with minimal English instruction using a 90-10 model. Second and third graders received about half of their instruction in Navajo and half in English. Fourth and fifth graders received most of their instruction in English with minimal daily Navajo literacy instruction.

Although this system of education was deemed as less effective than English-only education by the changing administration and new state education policies, the program continued through parent and teacher support resulting in the establishment of Tséhootsooí Diné Bi'ólta' [TDB] (The Navajo School at the Meadow Between the Rocks).

Tséhootsooí Diné Bi'ólta' is currently in its second year as a school providing instruction mostly in Diné. Now operating as a K-7 school and expanding to a K-12 institution, Tséhootsooí Diné Bi'ólta' continues to strive for maintaining and/or revitalizing the Diné language. Still by choice, parents enroll their mostly monolingual English-speaking children at TDB to become proficient in the Diné language.

TDB became a school in 2004 after the district underwent reorganization as part of a school reform effort. This created a more ideal situation for Diné language revitalization/maintenance as greater control evolved. This control was manifested in the development of a culturally responsive curriculum, creating a school wide Diné language environment, controlling English instruction by amount of time and content of instruction, unified belief of Diné language revitalization (for families with no speakers of Diné) and maintenance among school aged children, and greater direct involvement in the training for parents and teachers.

While revitalizing the heritage language, a somewhat different approach in attaining academic achievement involving language is taken by TDB. Students gain proficiency in Diné through developing their Basic Interpersonal

Communicative Skills [BICS] (Cummins, 1980) in the primary grades. This allows for the student to gain a broad knowledge of language in terms of vocabulary, concepts, and language structure (Wong Fillmore & Snow, 2000) required for developing the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency [CALP] (Cummins, 1980) in Diné. CALP in Diné is then carefully transferred to develop CALP in English. According to Cummins, BICS and CALP support each other. Anecdotal reports from teachers and parents of students in the Diné-medium classrooms (prior to the establishment of a separate school) reported that students could read and write well in Navajo but struggled with speaking the Diné language, which supported the decision to establish a more Diné language rich environment.

At the school, Diné-language instruction is provided only by Diné-language teachers and English-language instruction is provided only by English-language teachers. Kindergarten and first grade classrooms now provide 100% instruction in the Diné language. Beginning at second grade, 90% of the students' time at school (instructional and non-instructional time including time before and after school, playground, and lunch) is conducted in Diné while 10% of their time at school (all instructional time) is conducted in English. Succeeding grade levels receive an additional 10% of their time at school in English. At sixth and seventh grades (and continuing to 12th grade as the school expands to K-12), half of their time is conducted in Navajo and the other half is conducted in English. The model is set up in a way where students should receive maximum exposure to the Diné language (at school) to provide for the greatest effect on acquiring (and instilling) the Diné language (heritage language) as a second language. By emphasizing oral language development as much as possible before puberty, students will be able to retain the language. According to Diné cultural practices, a puberty ceremony is conducted during this brief transitional phase into adulthood for the body and mind to continue to function well before their solidification. This is also true according to current brain research (Genesee, 2000) on language acquisition.

TDB is based on the Diné philosophy of education aligned to western processes of schooling. This provides for "relevant education to become successful in a multicultural society" as our mission states and to carry on the vision of "Diné values of life-long learning."

### **Gauging Success**

TDB is a unique school instructing Diné students (also includes other ethnic backgrounds) who speak mostly English using the Diné language to gain proficiency in thinking, speaking, reading, and writing in the Diné language as a heritage language. This is a language revitalization effort.

The uniqueness of the school requires a different curriculum to reach its goal. This curriculum emphasizes the use of the Diné language and culture.

The school is transforming itself into a standards-based system addressing four questions: (a) What is it you want your child to know and be able to do? (b) How will you teach them? (c) How will you know they've learned? and, (d) If not, then what?

Since the 1970s, these basic questions have been asked of Diné parents and elders in communities across the Diné reservation (Navajo Division of Education, 1977). Similar questions were asked of parents in surveys as recent as the spring of 2005. In general, parents acknowledge the fact of language loss and obscured cultural identity among younger Diné populations over the years. In response to this, Diné language and cultural values are coupled with challenging state academic content standards. Parents want Diné language and Diné cultural values and practices to be taught in schools even today (see Table 1).

Skilled teachers (by practice and certification) use strategies so that Diné students can acquire their heritage language. Years of teaching practice and training to provide instruction in Diné-medium classrooms and new teacher preparation programs such as the Diné Teacher Education Program (Diné College, 2005) now make it possible for teachers to be specifically trained to teach in Diné-medium classrooms and schools. As certified teachers, the teachers are also trained in creating and implementing an assessment system to monitor student academic progress.

Table 1  
Percentage of Parents and Students Agreeing to Survey Items

Item	Younger Students (n=619)	Older Students (n=1,116)	Parents (n=1,098)
Diné Language loss is in effect	-	63%	85%
Diné language/culture should be in school	85%	70%	82%
Diné language/culture is important today	79%	59%	79%
I am proficient in the Diné language	51%	8%	42%
I will assist in Diné language transmission	-	87%	51%

Note. “Younger students” are students in grades K-3 while “Older students” are students in grades 4-12. Due to complexity of item, younger students weren’t asked about language loss and were asked if they spoke Diné in place of proficiency. Only older students were asked about language transmission.

Teacher created Curriculum Base Measures (CBMs) in Diné reading and Diné writing provide teachers and parents, information about student progress in basic skills. For math fluency, math CBMs were modified by rewriting instructions in Diné. All students in grades K-7 are assessed by CBMs in Diné.

In English, adopted reading and writing CBMs provide evidence of English growth. Only students from grades 2-7 are assessed by CBMs in English because English is not taught until second grade.

CBMs assess basic skills in reading, writing and math. Although the CBMs assess basic skills for each subject area, fluency in these subject areas determine success in attaining skills beyond basics in reading, writing and math. At TDB, CBMs are used as benchmarks to predict how well a student will perform on the state’s assessment, the AIMS test (Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards).

CBMs are based on end-of-year expectations for each grade level according to the existing curriculum, which in turn is based on the heritage language and culture and the state standards.

Students “predicted” not to pass AIMS based on CBM results are put in an intensive intervention program to provide support so they are able to meet the challenging state academic standards. In addition to CBMs, teacher-created formative assessments are used to monitor student academic progress. The intervention program is during and after school and is provided in both Diné and English depending on which subject is taught in which language at specified grade levels.

All students are assessed in the State of Arizona using the norm-referenced Terra Nova (for second graders) or the criterion-and-norm-referenced AIMS-Dual Purpose (for third through ninth graders). TDB students from grades 2-7 are also assessed with these same assessments. Arizona does not provide modifications by administering its assessment in a language other than English.

Research in bilingual education (the use of heritage language and culture) that claims students in bilingual education perform as well or better than English-only student is confirmed by TDB students in grades three and five as shown in Figure 1.

### Innovative Features

Curriculum: The curriculum at TDB uses the Diné Cultural Content Standards which were developed by the Division of Diné Education as part of a requirement of the Navajo Nation Code—Title X (education law). This provides the basis

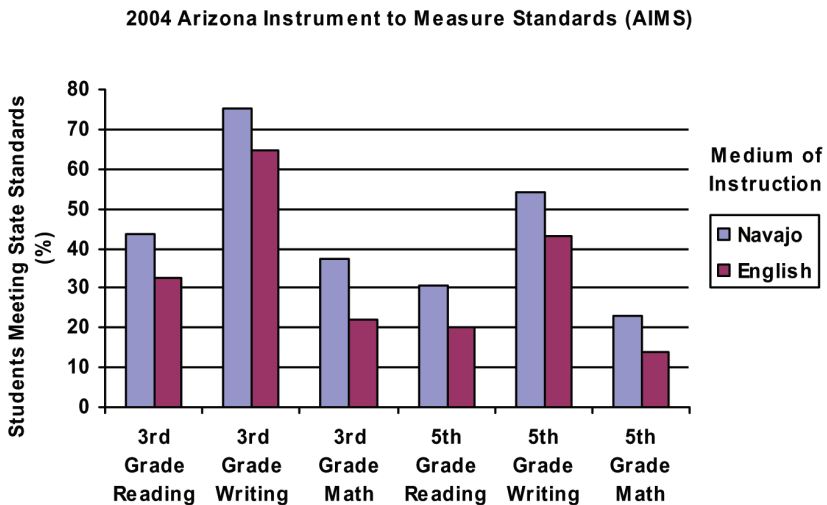


Figure 1. Academic Performance Based on State Assessment

of the total curriculum which also incorporates Arizona Academic Content Standards in math, reading and writing (science and social studies is forthcoming). A vertical team which includes certified teachers from each grade level and classified staff (instructional assistants, a secretary, a parent educator, and custodians) is charged with the responsibility of revising the curriculum on an on-going basis. Classified staff also provides input into the curriculum framework as they are Diné within the community and are considered experts in Diné language and culture. The majority of the staff (including the English-language teachers) is Diné with their first language being Diné. Parents and community members also provide input on the curriculum as the curriculum should reflect community values and wishes (to address the question, “What is it that you want your child to know and be able to do?”).

Diné-language and Diné cultural rich environment: Being a separate school, TDB can monitor language use to create a Diné language rich environment including lunch room, playground, hallways and the bus. The goal is to provide training to all that come into contact with TDB students in using “Situational Navajo,” a series of activities aimed to create real-life situations that concentrate on the use of verbs to acquire the Diné language. All staff in the TDB building takes part in the Diné language development and education of the students. This is based on the Diné k’é (clan relationships) system of living. In traditional Diné education, every relative has a responsibility in teaching their child whether it be singing, praying, ceremonial procedures, and cultural or societal survival practices. This concept is manifested in the TDB environment.

Parent Involvement: Historically, parent involvement has always been a positive aspect of the Diné-medium program due to the fact that parents enroll their students at TDB by choice. In 2004, only nine of the 179 students enrolled at TDB had Diné as their primary language. Mostly families in which English is the language of the home enroll their children at TDB in hopes that the Diné language could be revitalized within their families through these children. Parents want to see this happen so they are involved in the educational process. Training for parents is both informal (lunch time get-togethers going over Diné language phrases surrounding them such as “Getting Ready for School”) and formal presentations regarding the stages of language acquisition, acquiring a heritage language as a second language, using technology to aid in language revitalization, cultural presentations and standards-based learning and teaching. Besides language or academically orientated involvement, parents also become involved in supporting the teaching staff. Activities such as appreciation dinners, fund raising, classroom set-up, and those with the operation of a total school involve parents, too.

Technology: During its first year as a school, strong district administrative support allowed for the purchase of laptop computers for every student and teacher at

TDB. Technology training for teachers in using technology as a tool in instruction and language learning (whether Diné or English) provided teachers with a greater repertoire of teaching skills to accomplish the goal of TDB. Parents were also trained on technology use and were shown how technology is used to the advantage of learning the Diné language. To aid in this process, each classroom is also equipped with an electronic projection device, a digital camera, and a digital video camera. Students now go online to access some reading, writing and math lessons developed in the Diné language that are culture based and also address academic standards. Parents will be able to use this technology too at home to assist their child's language learning process.

Staffing: The majority of the staff over the years since 1986 has stayed with Diné-medium instruction classrooms. Nineteen of the staff of 20 is Navajo. Eighteen of these 19 speak Diné as a primary language. One acquired Diné language as a second language. New teachers hired at TDB come from teacher preparation programs that specifically train to teach in a Diné-medium setting. Although the majority of the teaching staff are not community members from the five local communities (Pine/Oak Springs, St. Michaels, Fort Defiance, Sawmill and Red Lake) the school serve, many stay and work here. They are committed to the effort in maintaining and revitalizing the Diné language and share the belief of an educational system that's based on Diné tradition through Diné language and culture.

Total Program: As discussed by Holm & Holm (1995), TDB continues to be a total program. Predominant Diné-medium of instruction continues to last all day long and all year long. The school staff focuses on Diné-language instruction in reading, writing and math and slowly phases in new and improved ways of learning and teaching (CBMs as an example). The first component in TDB's overall program is to gain Diné language proficiency. In addition, they must meet the same standards expected of all students. By this, students, parents and teachers alike are regarded with the highest of expectations resulting in acquiring a heritage language and the added component of academic achievement.

### **Lessons Learned and Future Plans**

The following are some lessons learned by the establishment of TDB. This will guide future planning to ensure continued success:

- Strong administrative and financial support made the planning and implementation of TDB a success.
- Using collected data to gauge student success to provide student support to ensure that students are successful as well as validate the program's importance.
- Continued parental support and constant communication with the parents makes your school a stronger program.

- Using the term “immersion” is sometimes misleading. Therefore, the use of Diné-medium instruction or English-medium instruction correctly identifies the type of teaching that takes place in the classroom.
- Make sure new or innovative strategies are implemented gradually and done well before adding new things to the program.
- For curriculum development, begin with culture standards and not state standards
- As long as TDB is part of the school district which is under the auspices of the state, TDB will continue to fit-into the overall district educational goals.
- Continuous analysis of new and continuing federal and state policies regarding language instruction programs is essential.

### **Recommendations**

Begin with a survey of parents and community members on what they would like their children to know and be able to do. The survey may also include information on heritage language and culture. Community and parents need to have ownership in the educational program through meaningful involvement in the program’s development.

Collaborate with other schools that have the same goals for language revitalization or maintenance. The consultation and networking with other schools of the same type will assist in planning and implementing, as well as dealing with language issues and policies. Do not depend solely on tribal support on these issues.

Finally, Chris Sims (2005) advises never wait to start a language revitalization program because language shift occurs very rapidly. Take the chance as a community or a group and know that there are other communities that have made it work. The identity of the Diné people depends on the preservation and perpetuation of its language (Fishman, 1994). The continued existence of your language depends on it.

**Florian Tom Johnson**, Dual Language/Culture Director at the WRUSD ensures that the Diné language and cultural aspects of the school’s mission and vision are carried out. As a Diné educated at Rock Point, Florian, born and raised on Diné land continues to speak his primary Diné language as well as English.

**Jennifer Legatz**, Federal Projects Coordinator assists with the effort in managing federal funds specific to meeting the unique linguistic, cultural and educational needs of Diné students. With a strong interest in policy and language revitalization, Jennifer has children, who are Navajo, that are enrolled at TDB.

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