

Navajo Immersion Program at Fort Defiance Elementary School

Lettie Nave

The Navajo Immersion program is currently in its eighth year at Fort Defiance Elementary School. The students are 'immersed' in Navajo at school, particularly in the first two years of the program. In kindergarten, Navajo is the language of instruction and of communication. The teachers teach and communicate in Navajo. The students learn Navajo by hearing it and using it in academic and social communication.

Students do reading readiness in Navajo in kindergarten. Students are introduced to English reading readiness and math in first grade. The ESL teacher comes into the classroom for an hour every day. In second and third grades, the students go half-day in one language and half-day in the other. The students begin reading in English in second grade. Students use the reading skills that they have acquired in Navajo reading so that they adapt what they have learned quickly.

In grades four and five students are pulled out of the regular classrooms to attend the Navajo language class. The amount of Navajo is reduced to one hour a day, five days a week for students in fourth grade and four times a week for fifth grade students. Students receive instruction in Navajo reading and writing at this time. The rest of their class day is all in English in the regular classrooms.

The Navajo Immersion program is operated as an enrichment program for those parents who want their children to learn in both languages. Participation is voluntary; students take part only if their parents enroll them in the program. Students are re-enrolled each year.

Background Information

Education Policies passed by the Navajo Tribal Council in 1984 state that:

The Navajo language is an essential element of the life, culture, and identity of the Navajo people. The Navajo Nation recognizes the importance of preserving and perpetuating that language to the survival of the Nation. Instruction in the Navajo language shall be made available for all grade levels in all schools serving the Navajo Nation. Navajo language instruction shall include to the greatest extent practicable: thinking, speaking, comprehension, reading and writing skills and study of the formal grammar of the language.

The Arizona State Department of Education mandated in 1989 that every school district shall have a "foreign/native" language program.

In the past years Fort Defiance Elementary School has had good bilingual programs providing services for students with limited English proficiency and with relatively well developed Navajo language proficiency. By the mid-80's the majority of the students who were enrolled at the school were dominant in

the English language and the school felt that providing services for these students was no longer necessary. The few who were limited in English were given help by the classroom teacher or the English as a second language (ESL) teacher. The school was then left with a decision: drop the bilingual programs or change the programs.

In 1987, students in K-2 were tested on English and Navajo language abilities. The results showed that about two thirds were dominant in English and only a third had any knowledge of Navajo. By looking at the tests results, the school realized that using the transitional approach was no longer appropriate. The program that emerged is what is now called "Navajo Immersion." It is different from conventional programs in a number of ways.

Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community Bilingual Program

Emmett S. White, Kelly Washington, and Beverly Smith

The Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community recognizes its responsibilities through tribal constitutional mandates to preserve its culture, traditions, and language. Their bilingual program was established through allocations of tribal funds in 1992. The Pima and Maricopa languages are being addressed in the development of lesson plans, teaching tools, materials, illustrations, writing, and translating as well as the development of dictionaries. The Pima language is presently taught at Scottsdale Community College.