

Young Pendleton students learn to speak Umatilla

By JENNIFER COLTON

In the hallways of the Pendleton Early Learning Center (PELC), it's not uncommon to hear 5- and 6-year-olds speaking words and phrases of the Umatilla language, one of three dialects of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR).

At PELC, students take a "Walk to Language" every week, learning words and phrases in tribal languages from the CTUIR. Matt Yoshioka, Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment for the Pendleton School District, says they started the kindergarten Umatilla language program when the early learning center opened two years ago.

"We do have a large Native American population in our school district because our district takes in the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Having this language program is a way for us to show that our partnership is strong with the tribe, with the reservation," he says. "We hope to help our students who are Native American know that it's their school, that their culture and history is here."

The demographics fluctuate, but between 15 and 20 percent of the students at PELC have a tribal background. Across the whole Pendleton School District, it's between 13 and 20 percent, depending on the year.

Introducing kindergarteners – PELC only houses pre-school and kindergarten classrooms – to language takes advantage of a time when young children easily absorb new vocabulary.

"This is a great time for them to incorporate new language," PELC Principal Lori Hale notes. "They're little sponges at this age, and we just want them exposed to that language and to have an awareness of what's around them,"



All of the signage at Washington Elementary is now displayed in English, Braille, the Umatilla language, and Weyíletpuu. EO photo by E.J. Harris

Keeping with that theme, the kindergarten lessons go past simple language. Hale said teachers develop units that align with what the classes are studying, from social studies to science, and then work in the Umatilla language lessons. Teachers also develop lessons around a piece of native culture – studying salmon, for example, and how it relates to the Columbia River and native cultures.

"The first couple weeks of the year, they're teaching the kids greetings in the Umatilla language, then they work on colors, then they work on animal names," Hale says. "They've focused on cultural dress and food, just teaching the kids

about the language and culture. It's been a wonderful program."

During the school year, the kindergarteners make coloring books with Umatilla vocabulary, and pods learn songs in the Umatilla language that they perform at the

winter concerts.

Both Yoshioka and Hale agree the PELC program has been a success, and they'd like to expand to other schools – if they could. Yoshioka said finding volunteers from the small number of native speakers is the primary issue holding it back. To host the program at PELC, Mildred Quaempts, the director of the language program for CTUIR, travels to the school four days a week, working with one of PELC's teachers to facilitate the Walk to Language lessons in all of center's 10 kindergarten classrooms, and to expand to other schools would require more master speakers.

"We would love to expand,"



Education

Yoshioka said. "There are lots of studies that show language lessons taught to children can improve not only language learning but acceptance of those around them. The kids just love it, they absolutely eat it up, and this is so much more than just language."

In the past, the district has offered a Native American language afterschool class at Washington Elementary, a school that has signage in both English and in Umatilla throughout the building.

Although speakers of Umatilla and Walla Walla languages remain, the distinctive dialect of the Cayuse people has been lost, and the Cayuse people now use the Weyíletpuu dialect of the Nez Perce language as their own. To promote and protect the remaining languages, the CTUIR runs a language program to work toward documenting, preserving, revitalizing the Umatilla, Walla Walla, and Weyíletpuu languages.

The CTUIR Language Program offers immersion classes for pre-school children, age 3 to 5, at the Nixyaawii Community School, as well as community classes with fluent speakers. You can learn more about the CTUIR Language Program online at ctuir.org/departmentsprogram/language-program.

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