



**EPSSL** | **EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES LABORATORY**  
Language Policy Research Unit

**\*\*\*NEWS RELEASE\*\*\***

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**ACQUIRING HERITAGE LANGUAGE HELPS NATIVE STUDENTS ACHIEVE  
ACADEMICALLY, STUDY SAYS**

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TEMPE, Ariz. (Thursday, February 9, 2006) — Native American and Hawaiian children who learn their heritage language typically learn English no slower than their peers enrolled in English-only programs and generally outperform those same peers on standardized tests, according to a new study released by the Language Policy Research Unit at the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University.

Heritage languages are endangered. Of 210 Native languages still spoken in the U.S. and Canada, only 34 (16 percent) are still being acquired as a first language by children. Proficiency in these languages is a crucial element of child-adult interaction in Native communities. This study, “Language Planning Challenges and Prospects in Native American Communities and Schools,” examines planning and policy efforts that successfully revitalized endangered heritage languages of four Indigenous groups within the U.S. (Pueblo, Blackfeet, Navajo, and Native Hawaiian).

The study’s authors, Mary Eunice Romero Little and Teresa L. McCarty of Arizona State University, conclude that despite the positive outcomes within these tribes, the revitalization initiatives are being tested by the federal No Child Left Behind Act and state policies. These policies restrict curriculum options and pressure schools, whether labeled as “underperforming” or “performing,” to abandon proven Native language approaches in the quest to raise test scores.

The key findings from this study are:

- Heritage-language immersion is a viable alternative to English-only instruction for Native students who are English-dominant but identified as limited English proficient.

- Time spent learning a heritage/community language is *not* time lost in developing English, while the absence of sustained heritage-language instruction contributes significantly to heritage-language loss.
- It takes approximately five to seven years to acquire age-appropriate proficiency in a heritage (second) language when consistent and comprehensive opportunities in the heritage (second) language are provided.
- Heritage-language immersion contributes to positive child-adult interaction and helps restore and strengthen Native languages, familial relationships, and cultural traditions within the community.
- Literacy skills first developed in a heritage language can be effectively transferred to English, even for students with limited proficiency in the heritage language upon entering school.
- Additive or enrichment programs using heritage-language immersion represent the most promising approach to heritage- and second-language instruction.
- The language planning and policy efforts of the four tribes researched in this study are fundamental to tribal sovereignty and local education choice.

Find this document on the web at:

<http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsl/EPRU/documents/EPsl-0602-105-LPRU.pdf>

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The Language Policy Research Unit (LPRU), co-directed by Dr. Terrence Wiley and Dr. Wayne Wright, promotes research and policy analysis on the challenges and opportunities posed by global multiculturalism. LPRU activities are intended to inform public discussion and policymaking in state, national, and international contexts.

Visit the LPRU website at <http://language-policy.org/>

The Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSL) at Arizona State University offers high quality analyses of national education policy issues and provides an analytical resource for educators, journalists, and citizens. It includes the Arizona Education Policy Initiative (AEPI), the Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU), the Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU), and the Language Policy Research Unit (LPRU). The EPSL is directed by Professor Alex Molnar.

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