

Sustaining and revitalizing Indigenous languages in Oklahoma public schools: Educational sovereignty in language policy and planning

Kari A. B. Chew^{a*} and Courtney Tennell^b

^a*Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, University of Oklahoma, Norman, USA;*

^b*Educational Psychology, University of Oklahoma, Norman, USA*

*Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education, University of Oklahoma, 820 Van Vleet Oval, Collings Hall, Room 203, Norman, OK 73019-2041, kchew@ou.edu

Kari A. B. Chew (ORCID 0000-0003-1229-2437) is a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation and assistant professor of Indigenous Education in the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Oklahoma Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education. She earned a doctorate in Indigenous Language Revitalization and Linguistics from the University of Arizona in 2016 and completed a postdoctoral fellowship with the NETOLNEW “one mind, one people” Indigenous Language Partnership at the University of Victoria in 2020. Her research focuses on Indigenous language education, Indigenous language curriculum, and the role of technology in Indigenous language education. She works closely with the Chickasaw Nation on language education projects.

Courtney Tennell (ORCID 0000-0003-1062-0409) is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and a doctoral student in the department of Educational Psychology at the University of Oklahoma Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education. She is a Razorback-Sooner Scholar at the Zarrow Center for Learning Enrichment. Her research focuses on Indigenous special education, postsecondary transition and postsecondary transition resources provided to Indigenous students.

Sustaining and revitalizing Indigenous languages in Oklahoma public schools: Educational sovereignty in language policy and planning

As Indigenous scholars committed to Indigenous education in Oklahoma, we use a decolonizing approach to consider how the 39 Indigenous Nations in Oklahoma assert educational sovereignty to sustain Indigenous high school students' linguistic and cultural identities. Seeking to promote education models that sustain and revitalize Indigenous languages, we ask: 1) How do Indigenous Nations in Oklahoma engage in language planning and liberate educational sovereignty through policies, programs, and services to their high school students? and 2) How do Indigenous Nations navigate Oklahoma state education language-in-education policies that may support or restrict Indigenous language education in public high schools? We consider the function of Oklahoma public high school classrooms as sites of Indigenous language revitalization and reclamation. We discuss how Indigenous educational sovereignty to support language revitalization occurs in interaction with overlapping and often competing language-in-education policies imposed by the state of Oklahoma. A goal of this article is to share knowledge with Indigenous Nations, educators, and policy makers who are involved in language planning. We conclude with recommendations of ways to support culturally sustaining and revitalizing education models for Indigenous students, communities, and languages in Oklahoma.

Keywords: community-based language planning, decolonization, educational sovereignty, Indigenous language education, world language education

Introduction

What is currently the state of Oklahoma is on the homelands of Hasinai (Caddo), Cáuigù (Kiowa), Kitikiti'sh (Wichita), N̄m̄m̄n̄n̄ (Comanche), Na i sha and Ndee (Apache), and Wahzhazhe (Osage) peoples. As a result of forced removals by the federal government, there are now 39 Indigenous Nations in the state, 38 of which are currently federally recognized. This makes the state a unique context for Indigenous language education efforts (see, e.g., Chiocca,

2020; Goodson, 2019; Tribble, 2014) toward “an intense commitment not to ‘lose’ the next generation... and to strengthen intergenerational ties and cultural continuance through the ancestral language” (McCarty, 2020, p. 2). There are challenges to teaching these languages in US public school contexts where Indigenous language education may be supported or restricted by language-in-education policies which prioritize English, a language of colonization. The authors are Indigenous scholars who are invested in Indigenous education in Oklahoma. Chew is a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation, Chikashshanompa' (Chickasaw language) learner, and professor of Indigenous Education at the University of Oklahoma. Tennell is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, a doctoral student at the University of Oklahoma studying Indigenous students' postsecondary transition, and a former public school teacher in Oklahoma.

We take a decolonizing approach (Smith, 2021) to consider how Indigenous Nations in Oklahoma assert educational sovereignty to sustain Indigenous high school students' linguistic and cultural identities, and, in doing so, strengthen their Nations and futures. As Chikashsha (Chickasaw) and GWY (Cherokee) scholars, we understand Indigenous sovereignty to be inherent. In Chikashshanompa' (the Chickasaw language), there is no translation for “sovereignty” because it just *is*. At the same time, Indigenous sovereignty is not always recognized and respected by settler colonial systems. Therefore, educational sovereignty challenges “asymmetrical power relations” within education spaces while working to “reclaim and revitalize what has been disrupted and displaced by colonization” through processes led by and grounded in accountability to Indigenous communities (McCarty & Lee, 2014, p. 103).

Seeking to promote culturally sustaining and revitalizing education models (McCarty & Lee, 2014), we ask:

- 1) How do Indigenous Nations in Oklahoma engage in language planning and “liberate educational sovereignty” (RedCorn, 2020, p. 499) through policies, programs, and services to their high school students?
- 2) How do Indigenous Nations navigate Oklahoma state education language-in-education policies that may support or restrict Indigenous language education in public high schools?

A goal of this article is to share knowledge with Indigenous Nations, educators, and policy makers. We discuss examples of Indigenous educational sovereignty to support culturally sustaining and revitalizing language education models and offer recommendations of ways to better support Indigenous students, communities, and languages in Oklahoma.

Language policy and planning and settler colonialism

To understand threats to Indigenous language education, we frame US language policy and planning as a tool of settler colonialism. The settler project seeks to eliminate Indigenous Peoples so that settlers can establish “a new home” on the land and “insist on [their] sovereignty over all things in their new domain” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). It is not an event, but an ongoing structure maintained through the genocide of Indigenous Peoples as well as the institution of slavery (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wolfe, 1999). Language policy and planning, which refers to “the complex sociocultural processes which influence the function, use, structure, and/or acquisition of language varieties” (Sudbeck, 2015, p. 76), has been “foundational to U.S. settler-colonial activities” (Iyengar, 2014, p. 34). As Iyengar (2014) asserts, as the “expanding

settler state sought to increase ‘white’ life and eliminate Native life... many of the policies enacted towards this increase and this elimination worked via language” (p. 40).

Though the US has never had an official language, it has established “a hegemonic language hierarchy” privileging languages of colonization, especially English (Iyengar, 2014, p. 34). The lack of an official language was strategic to US expansion, as early European settlers sought not only religious freedom, but also “linguistic freedom” (Iyengar, 2014, p. 40). Without support of European languages, “the desired masses of ‘free white persons’ would not have been available to settle the expropriated Native land” (Iyengar, 2014, p. 40). The 1830s marked a significant time period in which maintaining the linguistic freedom of settlers entailed denying language to Black and Indigenous Peoples. White settlers benefitted from the “Common School Era” of publicly funded schooling in English and other European languages, and also passed laws against literacy for Black people (Iyengar, 2014). The US government further passed the Indian Removal Act of 1830 to force Indigenous Nations to lands west of the Mississippi River. Removal expelled the Five Tribes—including the Chahta (Choctaw), Chikashsha (Chickasaw), Mvskoke (Muscogee / Creek), Seminole, and Tsalagi (Cherokee), as well as the Black people enslaved by these Nations¹—from the southeast to Indian Territory, which was created in 1834.

Settler debates about Removal became intertwined with “the idea that Indians possessed a peculiar and fixed grammatical organization that obstructed ‘civilization’” (Harvey, 2015, p. 507). Following Removal, the US prioritized assimilation of Indigenous peoples through education. By 1879, federal agents compelled and often forced Indigenous youth in Indian Territory to attend off-reservation English-only boarding schools, including Chilocco Indian

¹ For more information about slavery in the Five Tribes and the experiences of Freedmen and their decedendants, see Roberts, 2021 and the Oklahoma Historical Society’s bibliography of sources about Freedmen (<https://www.okhistory.org/learn/frbib>).

Agricultural School in Indian Territory (Lomawaima, 1994), Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania (Fear-Segal & Rose, 2016), and others (Lomawaima, Brayboy, & McCarty, 2018). It is well-documented that students were physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually abused for speaking their languages in boarding and residential schools in the US and other settler-colonial nations (for further information and resources for healing, see boardingschoolhealing.org). This violence perpetrated against Indigenous children is still felt across generations of Indigenous families and communities.

While the US government used language policy and planning as a means of settler domination, Indigenous Nations engaged in language policy and planning as a means of survival. Soon after arriving in Indian Territory, the Five Tribes established their own boarding and day schools to educate their youth in English (Cobb, 2000). The purpose of this English-language education was to prepare students “to engage politically, economically, and socially in American society, thereby ensuring increased stability” for their Nations (Chew, 2016, p. 14). These schools were closed or taken over by Oklahoma after it became a state in 1907 (Cobb, 2000), to make way for the state-controlled English-language public school system. Like in the federal boarding schools, Indigenous students in Oklahoma public schools experienced abuse and shame for speaking their Indigenous languages. Some made the difficult choice not to teach their Indigenous language to their children to protect them from racism and violence. As a result, many communities underwent a significant language shift toward English (Linn et al., 1998).

Community-based language planning to sustain and revitalize Indigenous languages

Indigenous language revitalization and reclamation movements gained momentum in the 1960s amidst Civil Rights movements and Indigenous activism (McIvor, 2020). From a Chikashsha

perspective, the work to sustain and revitalize Indigenous languages is of the utmost importance. Elder first language speaker Catherine Willmond speaks of a prophecy that the world will end when Chikashsha okla (Chickasaw people) no longer speak their language (Willmond, 2017). In other words, Indigenous languages must be sustained because they sustain the people. Cherokee linguist, first language speaker, and Elder Durbin Feeling has said “language is who we are. That’s you, that’s who you are. Everything else fits into that” (Cherokee Phoenix, 2020).

Indigenous Nations in Oklahoma have been at the forefront of work to sustain and revitalize their languages. Some notable examples include the Sac and Fox Nation’s Sauk Language Team-Based Master-Apprentice Model (see Hinton et al., 2018), the Chickasaw Nation’s use of technology to learn and teach language (see Hinson, 2019), the Cherokee Nation’s efforts to prepare language teachers (see Morrison, 2020), and the reclamation of yUdjEha (Yuchi/Euchee) and myaamia (Miami) among families (see Baldwin et al., 2013; Grounds & Grounds, 2013). These are all examples of community-based language planning as an expression of Indigenous sovereignty. What distinguishes community-based language planning from other types of languages planning is that it is “bottom-up,” driven by “the agency of local people in language related decision making,” and “motivated by local needs and desires” toward sustaining both the language and the people (McCarty, 2018, p. 23). This type of language planning therefore cannot be imposed on a community and there is no “one-size-fits-all” model (McCarty, 2018).

Each of the 39 Indigenous Nations in Oklahoma has different needs, aspirations, and paths forward for their languages and may make different choices about whether it is worthwhile to offer language classes in public school settings. Due to the colonizing and homogenizing legacies embedded in Western education (McCarty 2020; Sabzalian, 2019; Spring, 2007), some

Nations may choose not to invest precious language resources in public school systems. Some Indigenous language education practitioners view public-school courses with skepticism because these types of courses rarely lead to language proficiency (Hinton, 2011; Morgan, 2005). This is because the language is usually taught as a subject, with most instruction occurring in English to talk *about* the language but not *in* the language. Instead, they advocate for immersive models of language education which are controlled by the Indigenous community.

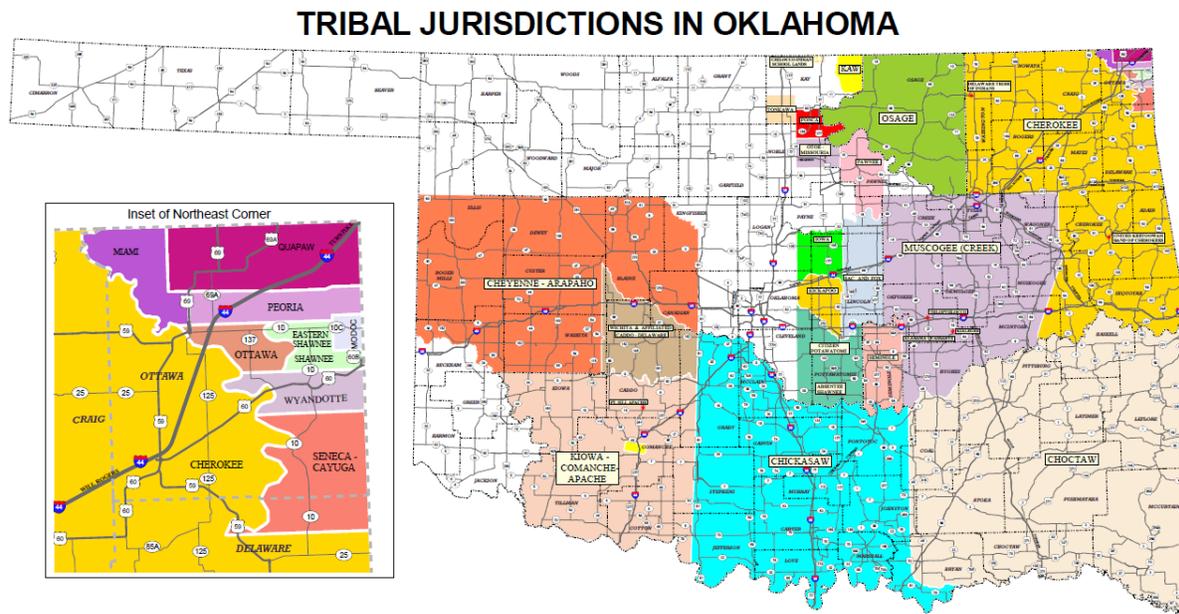
For other Nations, offering Indigenous languages in Oklahoma public high schools may be very important to long-term language planning. Nations that do not operate their own schools may desire to invest in public schools that their youth attend. Offering language courses in public school settings may be a way to not only increase interest in the language but increase educational outcomes of students (McCarty, 2020). Research about youth engagement in language and culture revitalization and reclamation further reveals that youth “yearn” for their languages (Wilson & Kamanā, 2009, p. 375). A study with Indigenous high school students in the U.S. southwest found that students who had opportunities to learn their language experienced an “awakening” characterized by a sense of agency in asserting their Indigenous identities and encouraging their families and communities toward active language revitalization efforts (Lee, 2009; 2014). For this reason, high schools can be important sites for supporting language and culture revitalization and reclamation because they serve students at a time of transition from youth to young adulthood—a critical time of experiencing new consciousness of and motivation to learn one’s ancestral language.

Indigenous language-in-education policies impacting Oklahoma

Oklahoma, compared to other states, has been relatively restrictive of Indigenous language education (De Korne, 2010), despite having a large Indigenous population. As of 2020, 12.5% of Oklahoma public high school students self-identified as “American Indian” (the term used by the state) (Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE), 2020).² Many of these public high schools are situated within tribal jurisdictions and reservations, affirmed by the 2020 *McGirt v. Oklahoma* supreme court ruling and related rulings (see Figure 1). Some national legislation exists to protect and support Indigenous languages, including the 1990/1992 Native American Languages Act (US Congress, 1990) and the 2006 Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act (US Congress, 2006) (Warhol, 2012). These acts obligate the US to preserve, protect, and promote the rights of Indigenous Peoples to use their languages as a medium of instruction in schools. The recently introduced bipartisan Durbin Feeling Native American Languages Act (US Congress, 2021) commemorates the thirtieth anniversary of the Native American Languages Act and honors Cherokee citizen and language advocate Durbin Feeling through a renewed push for interagency collaboration and a national survey of Indigenous language use, individual program needs, and federal spending. While these national efforts are critical, public schooling continues to be controlled at the state level. State legislation and policies significantly impact Indigenous language education efforts (Combs & Nicholas, 2012).

² This statistic does not include all Indigenous students such as Native Hawaiians and those who identify as mixed-race.

Figure 1. Tribal Jurisdictions in Oklahoma Map (Oklahoma Department of Transportation, 2010)



The liberation of educational sovereignty occurs in interaction with overlapping and often competing sovereignties of national and state governments (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). In 1990, Oklahoma passed legislation recognizing all Indigenous languages as world languages, thereby allowing Oklahoma's high school students to receive credits toward graduation for taking Indigenous language classes. Still, barriers such as credentialing and certifying Indigenous languages speakers as language teachers, and lack of curricula, kept Indigenous language classes a rarity in Oklahoma high schools. Without structural support, Indigenous language revitalization and education efforts were impeded, and the burden placed on Indigenous Nations. In 2001, Oklahoma adopted Indigenous language-in-education policy that encouraged the teaching of Indigenous languages (State of Oklahoma, 2001). While another step forward, this legislation did not support the use of Indigenous languages as a medium of instruction outside of world

language classrooms and gave authority over Indigenous language education to the state without provision for consultation with Indigenous Nations (De Korne, 2010). In the same year, the No Child Left Behind Act created further barriers to Indigenous language education by requiring teachers to hold a bachelor's degree, prove expertise in subject matter, and meet other state teacher certification requirements (US Department of Education, 2001). Throughout the 2000s, the Oklahoma State Legislature presented several “English Only” bills, attempting to make English the official language of the state (Hill et al., 2009), which were met with opposition within the legislature and from Indigenous Nations. Indigenous Nations continued to advocate for supportive spaces within Oklahoma public schools for Indigenous languages.

In 2014, the governor of Oklahoma signed into law H.B. 2921—a notable update to Indigenous language-in-education policy (State of Oklahoma, 2014). Authored by Chickasaw citizen and then state representative Lisa Billy, the act stated that “Native American language classes taught in the public schools may be counted by a public school in fulfilling core curriculum requirements and shall be granted the same credit as a world language” (section 1). Since the passing of HB 2921, ten Indigenous languages have received distinct subject codes and been offered at the high school level for world language credit: Chickasaw I-IV, Choctaw I-IV, Maskoke-Seminole I-IV, Maskoke I-IV, Osage I-IV, Pawnee I-IV, Sauk I-IV, Cherokee I-IV, Comanche I-IV, and, most recently, Potawatomi I-II (OSDE, 2019).

Each level of the course (e.g., Chickasaw I) is typically offered over one school year, though there may be scheduling variations across school districts. Students who take two levels of the same Indigenous language course (e.g., Choctaw I and Choctaw II) fulfill the state's College Preparatory/Work Ready Curriculum requiring credit equivalent to two years in the same World Language. The Oklahoma State Department of Education's (2015a) updated

standards for world language courses increase the flexibility Indigenous Nations and language teachers have in designing curriculum. For example, the updated standards—which address communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities—acknowledge that learning an Indigenous language is different from learning a “modern” (dominant) or classical language. It is important to recognize that, despite flexibility, Indigenous Nations remain beholden to Oklahoma’s curriculum framework.

Currently in Oklahoma, Indigenous Nations have asserted their sovereignty in offering Indigenous language courses in public schools, but limitations imposed by current Indigenous language-in-education policy remain. Certifying Indigenous language teachers is a primary obstacle to teaching Indigenous languages in Oklahoma public schools. According to Title 210 (OSDE, 2013) rules adopted by the state, three types of certifications can apply to Indigenous languages teachers: 1) a Native American Language certificate (certifying proficiency in the language and issued by the Nation), 2) a Native American Language teacher certification (provisional and issued by the state), and 3) an Oklahoma traditional or alternative teaching credential (issued by the state and not required). Indigenous Nations can certify a teacher’s proficiency in the language, but this does not equate to teacher certification as recognized by the state. Further, Oklahoma imposes its own requirements for how Indigenous Nations can issue this Native American Language certificate. Indigenous Nations must submit descriptions of their standards and subject area proficiency assessments and may only certify applicants with a bachelor’s or other academic degree. While the ability for Indigenous Nations to certify a teacher’s proficiency is important, the state’s surveillance of the certification process ultimately undermines Indigenous educational sovereignty.

After an Indigenous Nation grants a Native American Language certificate, the state issues Native American language teaching certification on a one-year provisional basis. Teachers with an Oklahoma traditional or alternative teaching credential must renew their Native American language teaching certification every five years, while those without Oklahoma credentials must renew every year and complete professional development hours. Such policies make it exceedingly difficult for Indigenous languages to be offered in public schools. It is also noteworthy that the certification status of the teacher dictates the type of credit students receive. At the high school level, a teacher must hold an Oklahoma traditional or alternative teaching credential, qualify for an Alternative Placement Teaching Certificate, or teach the class in collaboration with a certified teacher of record for students to earn world language credit. Effectively, if these criteria are not met, the student earns elective credit, regardless of the rigor of course content or teaching effectiveness. This is an example of further structural disadvantages for Indigenous students, as well as an undermining of Indigenous educational sovereignty.

Liberating educational sovereignty toward Indigenous language education

In this section, we draw from multiple sources of data (see Table 1) to consider how Indigenous Nations are already liberating educational sovereignty (RedCorn, 2020) to support language revitalization in Oklahoma public high schools. In our research, we found that state data and mainstream media outlets do not tell a complete story about what is happening in schools and communities. In contrast, Indigenous Nations and community member-scholars provide valuable information and stories in the form of tribal media coverage, tribal websites, and theses and dissertations. Indigenous Nations and community members are not only leading language

revitalization efforts, but they are also documenting and sharing their work. The following subsections bring these sources together to provide insight—beyond what policy analysis alone can provide—into Indigenous languages in Oklahoma public high schools, teachers and curriculum, and the creation of spaces beyond the classroom for Indigenous language use. In further exploring these examples, we advocate for “community-based educational accountability that is rooted in Indigenous education sovereignty” (McCarty & Lee, 2014, p. 101).

Table 1. Data sources

Source Type	Citation	Language	Topic
<i>Indigenous Nation Sources</i>			
Tribal News	Bark, 2020	Tsalagi (Cherokee)	Language Teacher Programs
Tribal News	Chavez & Good Voice, 2003	Mvskoke (Creek)	Youth Language Programs
Tribal News	Lonelodge, 2019	Tsêhêsenêstsestôtse (Cheyenne), Hinóno'êitít (Arapaho)	Community Language Work
Tribal News	Lehmann, 2013	Chikashshanompa' (Chickasaw)	Community Language Work
Tribal Website	Citizen Potawatomi Nation, 2017	Neshnabémwen (Potawatomi)	Youth Language Programs
Tribal Website	Citizen Potawatomi Nation, 2017	Neshnabémwen (Potawatomi)	Youth Language Programs
Tribal Website	Chahta Anumpa AiiKhvna, 2017	Chahta Anumpa (Choctaw)	Community Language Work
Tribal Website	Hansen, 2021	Mvskoke (Creek)	Youth Language Programs
Tribal Website	Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, 2021	myaamia (Miami)	Youth Language Programs
Tribal Website	Muscogee Nation, 2016	Mvskoke (Creek)	Youth Language Programs
Tribal Website	Muscogee Nation, 2016	Mvskoke (Creek)	Youth Language Programs
<i>Scholarship (* denotes Indigenous author)</i>			
Dissertation	Chew, 2016*	Chikashshanompa' (Chickasaw)	Community Language Work
Master's Thesis	Goodson, 2019*	Jiwere-Nut'achi (Otoe-Missouria)	Community Language Work
Dissertation	Hinson, 2019*	Chikashshanompa' (Chickasaw)	Community Language Work
Dissertation	Morrison, 2020	Tsalagi (Cherokee)	Community Language Work
<i>Other Sources</i>			
News	Eagleton, 2014	Pâripakûru' (Pawnee)	Language in Schools
News	Krehbiel-Burton, 2021	multiple	Youth Language Programs
News	McNutt, 1993	Jiwere-Nut'achi (Otoe-Missouria)	Language in Schools
News	Palmer, 2019	multiple	Language in Schools
Website	Sam Noble Museum, 2021	multiple	Youth Language Programs
YouTube Channel	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCyF_L10yHtHGUYNMEPKUNSG	multiple	Youth Language Programs
<i>Oklahoma State Sources</i>			
Teacher Certification	Certification Examinations, 2006	Tsalagi (Cherokee)	Language Subject Area Test
Teacher Certification	OSDE, 2013	-	Title 210
Academic Standards	OSDE, 2015a	-	World Language Standards
Data	OSDE, 2015b	-	Teacher/Student Data
Data	OSDE, 2016	-	Teacher/Student Data
Data	OSDE, 2017	-	Teacher/Student Data
Data	OSDE, 2018	-	Teacher/Student Data
Data	OSDE, 2019	-	Teacher/Student Data
Data	OSDE, 2020	-	Teacher/Student Data
Legislation	State of Oklahoma, 2001	-	Enrolled Senate Concurrent Resolution, No. 37
Legislation	State of Oklahoma, 2014	-	H.B. 2921

Indigenous languages in Oklahoma public high schools

While world language education in Oklahoma has generally declined due to budget constraints and shortages of certified language teachers (Palmer, 2019), Indigenous Nations are maintaining and growing Indigenous language course offerings in Oklahoma public high schools. Table 2 shows Indigenous language courses and enrollment in Oklahoma public high schools across five years. Examples of growth evidenced by Table 2 include a general increase in student enrollments in many (but not all) Indigenous language courses and the expansion of course offerings, including the addition of subject codes for Potawatomi and the offering of Cherokee Level 3 in 2019. This growth is important because study of Indigenous languages may support students to college and career transitions. Students may go on to attend universities which also offer Indigenous language courses. The Native American Language Program at the University of Oklahoma, for example, offers Cherokee (Tsalagi), Choctaw (Chahta), Creek (Mvskoke), and Kiowa (Cáuígù) language courses. Indigenous and non-Indigenous students who take these classes may also be well prepared to work for Indigenous Nations.

Table 2. Indigenous language course enrollment in Oklahoma public high schools (OSDE 2015b; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019)

Academic Year	2015/16		2016/17		2017/18		2018/19		2019/20	
Language*	Teachers**	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers	Students
Native American Language I	18	336	14	427						
Native American Language II	13	181	12	176						
Native American Language III	0	0	0	0						
Native American Language IV	1	11	0	0						
Other (Elective)	4	67	3	39	3	50	5	140	6	117
Other (World Language)			0	0	2	85	3	82	3	85
Cherokee I			1	18	3	143	4	174	3	168
Cherokee II			1	1	2	73	3	92	4	89
Cherokee III			0	0	0	0	0	0	1	20
Chickasaw I	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Chickasaw II	0	0	1	10	0	0	0	0	0	0
Choctaw I	2	78	0	0	6	74	8	100	11	166
Choctaw II	2	32	0	0	7	47	9	51	8	59
Comanche I			1	17	1	24	2	41	2	18
Comanche II			1	4	1	14	1	9	2	19
Maskoke I	1	20	0	0	2	112	1	104	1	24
Maskoke II	0	0	0	0	2	53	1	64	1	69
Maskoke-Seminole I	1	24	2	58	0	0	1	9	0	0
Maskoke-Seminole II	0	0	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Osage I	1	28	1	2	1	20	1	5	1	12
Osage II	1	2	1	7	0	0	1	14	0	0
Pawnee I	1	7	1	9	1	10	1	24	1	21
Pawnee II	1	2	1	6	1	7	1	8	1	13
Potawatomi I									0	0
Potawatomi II									0	0
Sauk I	1	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sauk II	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Level III and IV courses with no enrollment omitted

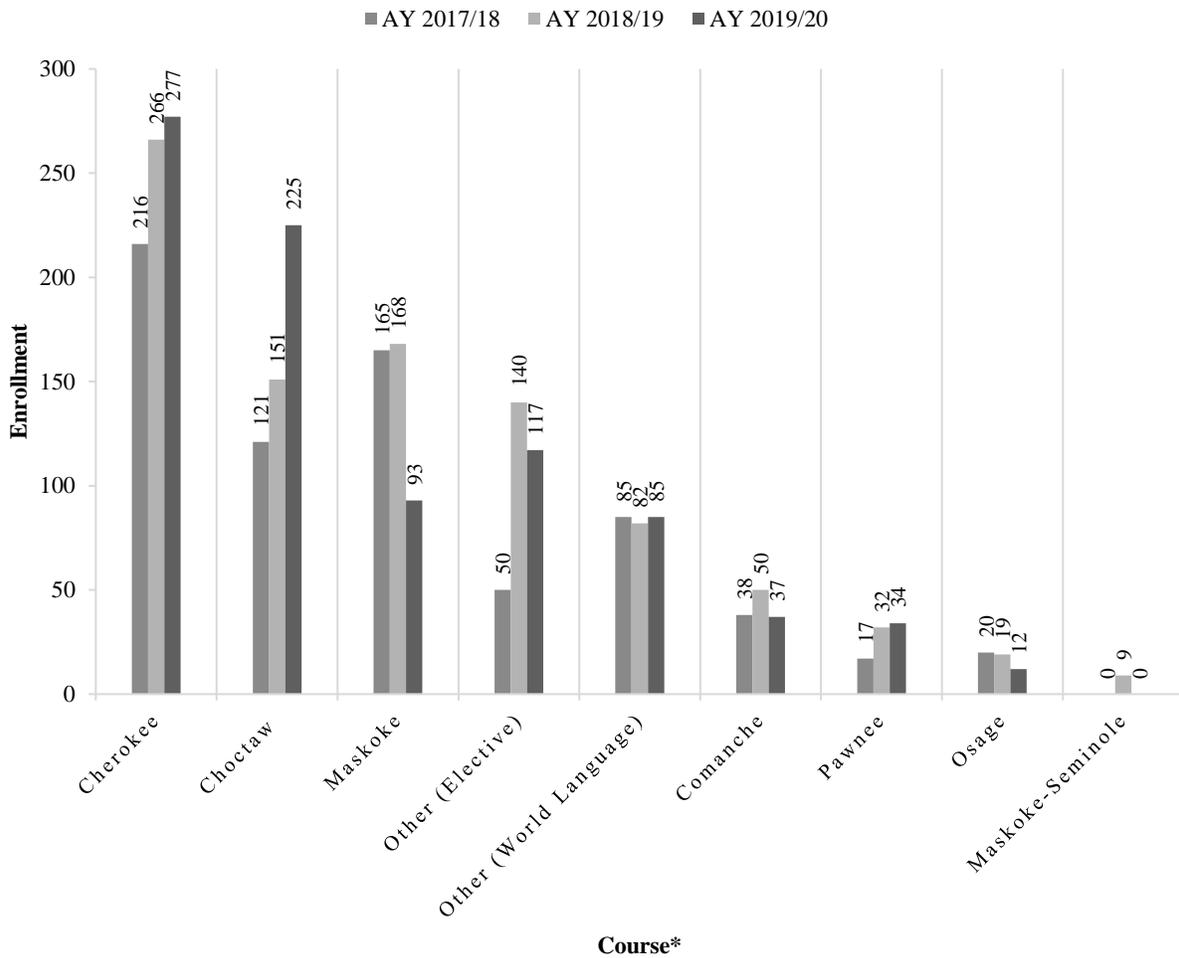
**OSDE data counts for teachers of a particular course are unduplicated by a unique identifier in the data.

The addition of an advanced Cherokee course is particularly significant given that in “40 of the state’s 77 counties,” most of which are rural, “no schools offer an advanced-level world language class” beyond level 2 (Palmer, 2019, para. 7). By offering an advanced Cherokee course, and other programming for public school students (see Morrison, 2020), the Cherokee Nation is countering trends in the decline of world language education in the state and providing opportunities for students to become increasingly proficient in Cherokee. The expansion of world language course offerings by Indigenous Nations demonstrates that educational sovereignty benefits not only Indigenous Nations but the state as well—an important recognition as Oklahoma challenges the 2020 *McGirt v. Oklahoma* ruling and argues that Indigenous sovereignty threatens the state.

Table 2 also indicates areas of struggle in offering Indigenous languages courses in Oklahoma schools. Having a subject code does not guarantee that the course will be offered regularly or at all. Though nine of ten Indigenous language courses with subject codes can be offered through level 4, the only course offered beyond the second level is the advanced Cherokee course. Further, there are vast differences in enrollments across courses (see Figure 2). As shown in Figure 2, during the 2019-2020 academic year, 277 students were enrolled in Cherokee courses while only 12 students were enrolled in Osage courses. Table 2 illuminates that enrollment in courses can be irregular and that students are not always retained in the transition from level 1 to level 2 courses. For example, there were 100 students in Choctaw level 1 courses in the 2018-2019 academic year but just 59 students in Choctaw level 2 during the following year. Reasons for inconsistent enrollment and possible challenges surrounding retention are unclear but might be partially attributed to sporadic teacher availability due to the

state’s Indigenous language teacher credentialing process. Scheduling issues and limited funding for these courses may also play a role.

Figure 2. Enrollment in Indigenous Language Courses (AY 2017-18 to AY 2019-20) (OSDE 2017; 2018; 2019)



*courses with no enrollment during period omitted

Importantly, state data tells only part of the story. A prime example is the case of Chickasaw language courses at Byng High School. Table 2 on its own may indicate that efforts to offer Chickasaw courses at the high school level are limited. The story of the partnership between the Chickasaw Nation's Language Revitalization Program (CLRP) and Byng High School reveals that efforts are robust and ongoing. Beginning in 2009, the CLRP piloted levels 1 and 2 of Chickasaw language courses, taught by Lokosh (Joshua D. Hinson), the CLRP director, at Byng (Hinson, 2019). After the pilot program, Merry Monroe, a Chickasaw citizen who had long worked at Byng Public Schools, taught the courses. Monroe was uniquely prepared to take on this role. She held a bachelor's degree in Native American Studies, which included four semesters of Chickasaw language study (Lehmann, 2013), and earned state teacher certification. She also participated in the Chickasaw Nation's Master-Apprentice program, in which an Elder first language speaker mentored her one-on-one to further develop her language proficiency.

Though the Chickasaw classroom was physically located at Byng High School, it was shaped by the CLRP. For example, the program gifted students "Byng Chikashshanompa' holissaapisa" (Byng Chickasaw language school) t-shirts (for an image of the design, see Hinson, 2019, p. 153). This is an example of an Indigenous Nation working to connect students in a public-school Indigenous language classroom to broader community-led language revitalization work. When Monroe retired in 2017, no one was immediately available to take her place and the courses paused. During this pause, the Chickasaw Nation began working on a high school curriculum based on its Rosetta Stone Chickasaw online course. The curriculum builds on the online course with in-person classroom activities and is designed to be delivered by a teacher or facilitator (Chew & Hinson, forthcoming). The course was piloted at Byng High School during the 2021-2022 school year.

The Chickasaw Nation is not alone in turning to technology to support Indigenous language education. In 2017, the Citizen Potawatomi Nation launched an online language course for world language credit at Wanette High School. Students attend the class in person and work through self-paced modules under the supervision of a facilitator. The Nation's Director of Language, Justin Neely, created the curriculum and visits the class in person monthly (Citizen Potawatomi Nation, 2017). Technology creates possibilities for language courses to be offered at multiple schools even when there are limited numbers of teachers. The Neshnabémwen (Potawatomi) courses can be offered at any public high school in the state for world language credit, if the school has an internet connection and an in-person facilitator for the online course (Citizen Potawatomi Nation, 2018). Similarly, Choctaw Nation reaches students attending public schools in its jurisdiction area through the broadcasting of daily language lessons (Chahta Anumpa Aikhvna, 2017). These innovative approaches are important examples of educational sovereignty in which Indigenous Nations make strategic use of limited teachers and language resources to serve as many of their students as possible.

Building and sustaining language programs in public schools requires resources. Because the State of Oklahoma relies on the wealth of stolen Indigenous lands and taxes generated off that land (Tuck & Yang, 2012), it has a responsibility to fund public schools and to support culturally sustaining and revitalizing Indigenous language education models in public schools. Shared investments toward language revitalization in public schools would alleviate some pressures on Indigenous Nations to invest precious resources that are needed by communities into state-controlled spaces. For some Nations, it is simply not feasible to pursue language revitalization in the current model of Oklahoma public schooling. The Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes, which are federally recognized as one Nation, are working to revitalize two languages:

Hinóno'eitíít (Arapaho) and Tsêhésenêstsestôtse (Cheyenne). The Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes work to support their public-school students who attend school at El Reno and Darlington, Oklahoma and the Sovereign Community School, a charter school in Oklahoma City. Because it is difficult to support both languages, Language Director Rebecca Risenhoover shared that a long-term goal is a “top of the line” tribally-controlled language immersion school with “at least 20 teachers” (quoted in Lonelodge, 2019, para. 25). This vision underscores that, while Oklahoma is not relinquished of its responsibility, Indigenous Nations are also working to liberate educational sovereignty in tribally-controlled schools, including language immersion schools.

Indigenous language teacher certification

An especially pressing barrier to offering Indigenous languages courses in Oklahoma public schools is identifying and certifying teachers. Because Indigenous language speakers tend to be Elders, who may be unable to teach in a classroom setting, middle and younger generations often take on these roles (Hinton, 2011). This barrier has existed for decades. In 1993, the superintendent of Frontier Public Schools in Red Rock, Oklahoma described searching for two years to “find a tribal member who spoke the Otoe language fluently and could teach at least one hour a day” (McNutt, 1993, para. 3). Jiwere-Nut’achi (Otoe-Missouria) speakers in the area were in their 80s and 90s, so the course was not offered until Truman Black, a language teacher in his 50s, moved back to the Red Rock, Oklahoma area and took the position (McNutt, 1993). Since 1996, there have been no living first language speakers of Jiwere-Nut’achi (Goodson, 2019), making the continued offering of Jiwere-Nut’achi by “language learners and rememberers” at Frontier Public Schools a remarkable act of educational sovereignty (Goodson, 2019, p. 63).

Christina Faw Goodson, a tribal member who holds a master's degree in applied linguistics, now teaches the high school courses for world language credit (Goodson, 2019).

As previously discussed, it is challenging to certify Indigenous language teachers in Oklahoma. Currently, the state does not offer strategies or programs to mitigate these challenges and very few Oklahoma universities offer support specifically for Indigenous language teachers. One notable program is the Cherokee Language Teacher Training Program offered at Northeastern State University in partnership with the Cherokee Nation (Bark, 2020). The program supports cohorts of five students, who receive a scholarship and commit to teaching at the *GWY J̄ŌSGT̄ŌŃJ* (Tsalagi Tsunadeloquasdi) Cherokee Immersion School or one of the Cherokee Nation's public-school partners. The Cherokee Nation is also the only Indigenous Nation in Oklahoma to develop an Oklahoma Subject Area Test for its language (Certification Examinations for Oklahoma Educators, 2006), and the Northeastern State University program is the only university currently preparing students for this certification exam (Park, 2020). Currently, the Cherokee Nation is working with the OSDE to review and revise the exam. The Cherokee Language Teacher Training Program is an example of how universities can partner with Indigenous Nations to support CBLP.

These types of programs are necessary because Indigenous language teacher certification has far-reaching implications. For example, if a language teacher does not have a state-issued teaching certificate or work with a supervising certified teacher of record, students earn elective rather than world language credit. As Figure 2 indicates, of 4,087 enrolled in Indigenous language courses between the 2015 and 2019 school years, 413 or approximately ten percent earned elective rather than world language credit. This has been an ongoing issue (Tribble, 2014), with these percentages increasing to 15% and 13% during the 2018 and 2019 school

years, respectively. The consequence is that students will still have to earn two of the same world language or computer technology credits to satisfy graduation requirements.

Spaces beyond the classroom for Indigenous languages

Lack of opportunities for students to apply skills outside of a class setting presents a major issue for school-based language revitalization (Greymorning, 2019). The Oklahoma Native American Youth Language Fair, hosted by University of Oklahoma's Sam Noble Museum each spring, functions as a collective space for youth to share their language work. The Fair is not offered in connection with the OSDE, yet public school students learning Indigenous languages actively participate in this space. The largest event in the state focused on highlighting linguistic diversity, the Fair draws student participants in pre-K through 12th grade from across Oklahoma and nearby states to compete in performance and material submission categories. Youth participants come from public schools offering Indigenous language programs, community-led language revitalization programs, and family groups. In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the typically in person Fair online (Sam Noble Museum, 2021). The virtual event drew over 300 video entries which were shared on the Fair's YouTube channel.³ The performance categories showcased high school speakers of yUdjEha (Yuchi/Euchee), Chahta Anumpa (Choctaw), Cáuижògà (Kiowa), Tsêhésenêstsestôtse (Cheyenne), Hinóno'eitíít (Arapaho), Pâripakûru' (Pawnee), and Kaáⁿze Íe (Kanza/Kaw).

The Pawnee student entries offer an important example of the interconnection of Indigenous language public school courses and the language fair toward sustaining and revitalizing Pâripakûrú (Pawnee). Students have been learning Pâripakûrú at Pawnee High

³ Visit https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCyF_L10yHtHGUYNMEPKUNSG

School in Pawnee, Oklahoma for world language credit since 2014 and for elective credit since 2004. Over time, enrollment in level 1 and 2 courses, taught by former President of the Pawnee Nation Warren Pratt, has steadily increased (see Table 1). Having the language courses in school is a source of community pride and offers students opportunities to connect more deeply to culture through language (Eagleton, 2014). Students in the course assert educational sovereignty in their efforts to present their language work annually at the Fair. In 2021, Pawnee students competed and won awards in several categories. Notably, the students' translation and performance of "Bohemian Rhapsody" was awarded first place in the Modern Song category and received statewide attention in a *Tulsa World* article (Krebhiel-Burton, 2021). The Fair provides an important space for students to be recognized for their language work.

Beyond the Fair, Indigenous Nations create opportunities for their youth and students to use and celebrate their languages. Each year, the Muscogee Nation holds its Challenge Bowl with the goal of bringing together schools and community members to develop tribal pride within its youth (Muscogee Nation, 2016). Students answer questions about language, culture, and government developed by employees and community members. This event is an act of educational sovereignty to, as the Muscogee Nation expresses, plant "'Long Rooted Grass' within our children so that whatever comes up against them, the roots of their people will hold them fast and steady" (Muscogee Nation, 2016). Similarly, the Cherokee Nation hosts both a Cherokee Language Bowl and a Cherokee Challenge Bowl (Chavez & Good Voice, 2003). There are currently no events like these in Oklahoma public schools to celebrate Indigenous languages. These community-created events demonstrate how Indigenous language education occurs beyond school systems and provides space for youth to make their own power (Jacob, 2013).

Indigenous Nations also offer after-school programming, camps, and clubs for youth and students to engage with their Indigenous languages. The Euchee/Yuchi Language Program's after-school program brings school aged youth from five area schools together at the Euchee Language Center in Sapulpa, Oklahoma to learn language through interactions with Elders, games, and group work, providing a model of what decolonizing language education can be (Muscogee Nation, 2016; Krebhiel-Burton, 2021). During the summer, students may also choose to attend the Euchee Language Summer Program. The Muscogee Nation similarly holds an overnight Mvskoke Language Summer Immersion Camp where students in grades 7-12 learn language and ceremonial aspects of the Muscogee culture (Hansen, 2021). The Miami Tribe of Oklahoma offers myaamia (Miami language) summer camps for youth, including high school students, to connect to language and culture (Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, 2021). The Chickasaw Nation offers summer family language camps and a year-around Chipota Chikashshanompoli (Youth Speaking Chickasaw) club for students to practice their language skills. Opportunities such as these, created by communities to support language revitalization efforts, give students space to speak their language outside of the school setting and bring the language back into their communities. When opportunities such as these exist, language classrooms in public schools can be treated by students as just one of many spaces where they access language (Chew, 2016).

Looking forward

Our research reflects what Sabzalian (2019) describes as an “attempt to critically look at educational policy and practice as it is lived” in a particular context, “looking not only for the ways that settler colonialism surface[s], but also for... pathways” (p. 202). In 2014, prior to legislation offering more support for Indigenous language education in Oklahoma, Tribble

(2014) asserted that the outcome of “current educational policies on the ground in Oklahoma is the continued promotion of a monolingual ideology, which is to the detriment of Native American language preservation and revitalization” (p. 220). While Oklahoma has made some progress, restrictive language-in-education policies linger and continue to create obstacles to Indigenous language education. Despite these restrictions and obstacles, Indigenous Nations in Oklahoma have liberated educational and linguistic sovereignty to advance language revitalization work—with a “momentum of *need* and a gravity of *action*” (Hermes et al., 2012, p. 385, italics added). The examples we highlight demonstrate how Indigenous Nations find pathways forward for their languages despite policies designed to advance the settler colonial project. Given our goal to share knowledge with Indigenous Nations, educators, and policy makers, we conclude by addressing these groups.

To policy makers: Policy makers at local, state, national, and international levels must take immediate and meaningful action to support the future of Indigenous languages. Oklahoma is obligated to:

- 1) work in partnership with Indigenous Nations to create a culturally sustaining and revitalizing path for Indigenous language teachers to be certified;
- 2) affirm Indigenous Nations’ full autonomy over certifying a teacher’s proficiency in the language so that this process is culturally sustaining and revitalizing;
- 3) ensure that all students earn world language rather than elective credit for Indigenous language study as a way of respecting that youth need these pathways and options for higher education;
- 4) create flexible pathways, aligned with the needs of individual Indigenous Nations, toward offering Indigenous language courses in public high schools; and

- 5) make accessible robust information and data about Indigenous language courses as both a resource and measure of accountability for the state and partner schools.

In Oklahoma and beyond, it is essential to the future of Indigenous languages that settler colonial governments take responsibility as partners in culturally sustaining and revitalizing education so that Indigenous Nations can lead work to create language-in-education policies aligned with community-based language planning efforts. Such a shift can forge new pathways toward increased language programming, including immersion programs and advanced language courses.

To educators: Osage education scholar Alex RedCorn (2020) asserts, “there is an intense need for all educators (Native and non-Native) working in Indigenous communities to be committed to, and comfortable with, ongoing critical self-reflexivity as it relates to Indigenous Peoples and educational systems” (p. 504). Toward meeting this need, educators, including teachers, professors, and administrators/leaders, at the preK-12 and college level, have a responsibility to learn about Indigenous Nations and language revitalization in their region and to advocate for culturally sustaining and revitalizing language-in-education policies. Colleges of Education can partner with Indigenous Nations to recruit, retain, and place Indigenous teachers. Some exemplary Indigenous faculty-led models include the Sapsik’wałá Teacher Education Program at the University of Oregon (Sabzalian, 2019), the Indigenous Teacher Education Program at the University of Arizona (Garcia et al., 2021), and Indigenous language teacher education programs at the University of Victoria (McIvor et al., 2018).

To Indigenous Nations: “Teaching [Indigenous] languages to students is a culturally sustaining and revitalizing practice” toward the liberation of our educational sovereignty (Lee & McCarty, 2017, p. 68). Affirming that there is no singular path toward reclaiming and

revitalizing Indigenous languages (McCarty, 2018), Sabzalian (2019) writes that “the active, creative, future-oriented practices and praxes of Indigenous peoples are as diverse Indigenous peoples themselves” (p. 1). This means that each Nation will have its own long-term plan and vision for language revitalization. As we have outlined, public high school courses can be important sites for language revitalization. At the same time, because public schools are state- rather than Nation-controlled spaces, Indigenous Nations must carefully consider benefits and drawbacks of working in these spaces. This work will require attending to the ways educational sovereignty is “interlaced with ongoing legacies of colonization” and holding state and federal governments accountable (Lee & McCarty, 2017, p. 62).

The Oklahoma context, which includes 39 Indigenous Nations and a diversity of Indigenous languages, has important implications for other contexts. Despite the legacies of forced Removals and relocations, English-only schooling, and other policies aimed at genocide and assimilation, Indigenous Nations in Oklahoma continue to assert educational and linguistic sovereignty. Indigenous Nations in Oklahoma are advancing language policy and investing in language education in ways that the state fails to do. Recently, the Cherokee Nation, for example, passed the Durbin Feeling Cherokee Language Preservation Act to invest \$16 million dollars toward ᎠᎿᎯ ᎠᎿᎯᎠᎿᎯ (Cherokee language) education (Cherokee Phoenix, 2020). While continuing to hold settler colonial governments accountable, Indigenous Nations are taking the actions required to ensure the continuance of their languages and Nations. These actions ensure that the “Long Rooted Grass” envisioned by the Muscogee Nation continues to grow strong within Indigenous youth (Muscogee Nation, 2016). We look forward to the day when Oklahoma steps up to be a culturally sustaining and revitalizing partner in this work.

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