

Indigenous Language Reclamation Through Community Partnerships: Strategies for Sustainable Growth



Credit: Lower Kuskokwim School District

Introduction: The Importance of Indigenous Language and Culture Revitalization

Indigenous language reclamation is more than a matter of cultural preservation; it is an act of educational and social empowerment. Across generations, Indigenous communities have endured systemic suppression of their languages and cultural practices through colonization, assimilationist policies, and schooling models that privilege dominant languages and norms over Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Hermes et al., 2012; Smith, 2012). The consequences are profound—loss of language and culture diminishes intergenerational knowledge transfer, weakens community cohesion, and undermines students’ sense of identity and belonging as well as their agency and engagement in educational processes.

Educational systems continue to reflect these longstanding barriers, often through limited access to culturally relevant instruction, the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge systems, and a lack of recognition of the linguistic and cultural assets Indigenous students bring to school (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Russell, 2023). Language and culture revitalization efforts directly challenge these imbalances by fostering linguocultural sovereignty, affirming students’ identities, and strengthening community wellbeing.

Supporting Indigenous-led language and culture revitalization efforts is deeply aligned with the WIDA mission to advance the academic success of multilingual learners by building on their linguistic, cultural, and experiential assets. The following section presents insights from three Indigenous partners currently collaborating with WIDA to lead innovative and community-rooted efforts for language and culture reclamation. Their experiences offer educators, administrators, and policymakers practical examples of how collaborative, culturally sustaining approaches can support Indigenous students' success while honoring the sovereignty and vitality of their languages and cultures.

Honoring Relationships and Building Pathways for Indigenous Educational Sovereignty

California Indian Education for All (CIEFA) is a statewide initiative dedicated to supporting Indigenous educators, students, families, and communities by expanding access to high-quality, culturally grounded educational resources. With a mission centered on educational sovereignty, self-determination, and culturally sustaining pedagogy, CIEFA's work reflects a commitment to community-defined priorities and relational accountability, as well as a deep knowledge and expertise of California's 109 federally recognized and numerous non-federally recognized tribes. CIEFA has played a leading role in addressing the widespread underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Native peoples in K-12 classrooms. Through extensive collaboration with Indigenous educators, culture keepers, and curriculum experts, CIEFA has co-developed a robust suite of classroom resources that are tribally informed and aligned to academic standards. Available for free on the CIEFA website, these materials affirm Indigenous languages, histories, and contemporary experiences. They are designed to support both Native and non-Native educators in teaching about Native peoples with accuracy, respect, and responsibility.



Credit: California Indian Education for All

CIEFA's partnership with WIDA reflects its broader approach to collaboration that is rooted in the four Rs of Indigenous research: Respect, Reciprocity, Relevance, and Responsibility. Together, CIEFA and WIDA are co-developing tools and guidance that support culturally sustaining assessment practices and ensure that Indigenous learners have access to responsive, student-centered educational opportunities. One such tool, being developed as a result of this partnership and funded by the University of Wisconsin's School of Education Innovation Grant, is a publicly accessible digital repository of Indigenous instructional and cultural resources. The repository serves to provide Indigenous educators, students, and community members with access to high-quality materials that support language revitalization and cultural learning, and includes resources that offer guidance on community-based educational practices. Rather than offering a one-size-fits-all solution, the collaboration between CIEFA and WIDA recognizes the

importance of local knowledge, educational self-determination, and trust built over time.

CIEFA is also collaborating with WIDA and the National Council on Measurement in Education Mission Fund to co-design a national protocol for assessment collaborations with Indigenous communities. This protocol offers guidance for research and assessment practitioners seeking to engage in culturally respectful, community-centered work with tribal nations. It draws from the experiences of Indigenous educators and researchers and affirms the central role of Indigenous sovereignty and community agency in shaping educational tools and policies. Through this work, CIEFA advocates for asset-based approaches, relational processes, and respectful collaboration—approaches that counter historically extractive practices, still evident today, and center Indigenous voices.

Across all of its initiatives, CIEFA continues to model what it means to lead with cultural humility, transparency, and responsibility. Its efforts demonstrate that Indigenous-serving educational organizations can, and must, be partners in transforming systems to better serve Native students. By strengthening educators' instructional skills and supporting Indigenous leadership in curriculum and assessment design, CIEFA helps pave the way toward educational futures that are grounded in language, land, and culture. This work serves as a reminder that meaningful change requires more than consultation. It requires collaboration, accountability, and enduring relationships that honor the knowledge, dignity, and sovereignty of Indigenous peoples.

Partnering With Community to Sustain Yugtun Language and Culture: A Story From Southwest Alaska

The Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD) encompasses 29 remote schools in Southwest Alaska where the Yup'ik people have maintained a linguistic and cultural heritage that continues to shape the education of current and future generations. Yugtun, a Central Alaskan Yup'ik language, is one of the few Alaska Native languages still spoken by children as a first language in some communities. However, as is the case with many Indigenous languages, English-dominant systems and structures pose ongoing challenges to its vitality and long-term survival. Given this context, LKSD remains committed to supporting and strengthening students' linguistic and cultural identities. This commitment is evident in LKSD's bilingual programs, dual-language instructional models, and professional development offerings for educators. These efforts go beyond simple language preservation—they serve to support students' whole identities, foster their confidence, and embed the Yup'ik worldview and values into daily school life. Furthermore, they align with the district's mission to prepare students for life beyond school in ways that honor their ancestral languages and cultural foundations.



Credit: Lower Kuskokwim School District

One powerful example of this vision in action is the development of the Yupiit Piciryaraitnek Qaneryaranek-Ilu Cuqyun (YPQC). Also known as the Yup'ik Culture and Language Measurement, this grow-your-own assessment is designed to evaluate students' language proficiency and cultural awareness in ways that reflect community values rather than external mandates. It was co-created by Elders and language educators of the Yup'ik Expert Group in collaboration with WIDA researchers and LKSD, and the deeply relational nature of this collaboration is evident in the iterative design process, community perspectives, and local capacity building that remained at the heart of this multi-year effort. The development of the YPQC goes beyond testing; it affirms the district's commitment to Indigenous sovereignty and knowledge systems. By including test content related to storytelling, non-verbal communication, oral language, and cultural awareness, the language and culture experts who informed its development helped shape an assessment that reflects the lived experiences of Yup'ik students. The process not only strengthened the community's expertise in assessment but also served as a reminder that meaningful educational tools are born of trust, humility, and sustained community engagement.

WIDA's role in the development of the YPQC was one rooted in mutual respect, cultural humility, and a shared vision for culturally and linguistically sustaining assessment practices. Rather than a one-directional exchange, WIDA researchers sought to listen, learn, and walk alongside LKSD, offering support in areas such as validation, documentation, and capacity development, without compromising local leadership and vision. This community-led, collaborative model of partnership illustrates how educational systems can shift toward relational, responsive practices that honor place, people, and Indigenous ways of knowing.

The development of the YPQC offers important insights for others seeking to support Indigenous language and culture in schools: Begin with the community, invest in local expertise, and value language as a sacred connection to identity and land. As the assessment continues to evolve and expand to secondary grade levels, it stands as a beacon of what is possible when educational systems prioritize cultural sustainability and Indigenous sovereignty in the classroom.

Lingít X'axaa.áxch: A Community-Centered Approach to Tlingit Language Assessment

Revitalization of the Tlingit language in Southeast Alaska is not only a matter of preservation; it is a collective way to honor culture, identity, and Alaska Native values. At Sealaska Heritage Institute, professionals work in collaboration with Elders, educators, families, youth, and external partners to sustain and enhance the Tlingit language and Southeast Alaska Native knowledge systems for future generations. Led by the vision and expertise of local educators, the development of the Lingít X'axaa.áxch (I Speak Tlingit) assessment reflects a key part of this mission, offering a culturally grounded way to uplift Tlingit language learners and affirm their growing fluency, cultural knowledge, and confidence.

Lingít X'axaa.áxch emerged from the Tlingit Culture, Language, and Literacy (TCLL) program, a community-based education model that began in Juneau and has grown to support students in kindergarten through grade 8. Each TCLL classroom includes a language teacher, a classroom teacher, and an Elder. This three-part structure reflects the Tlingit understanding that learning is fundamentally

relational, intergenerational, and deeply rooted in culture, place, and protocol. In this context, assessment is not a separate act, but rather part of a larger ecosystem that recognizes and supports how students learn, live, and express themselves as members of the Tlingit community. The Lingít X'axaa.áxch assessment currently focuses on oral language, consistent with the Tlingit oral tradition. Students taking the assessment are asked to speak about familiar people, places, and cultural practices, demonstrating their language proficiency by responding to culturally meaningful content captured in engaging illustrations. Instead of asking learners to perform abstract tasks removed from their lived experience, they are provided the opportunity to show what they know and how they know it through stories, relationships, and everyday interactions.

Lingít X'axaa.áxch was developed through collaborative efforts and an iterative design process. Teachers and local leaders co-designed the assessment, tested early versions with students, and revised test elements to ensure they were accessible, encouraging, and appropriate. Careful consideration was given to ensure Tlingit culture and traditions were accurately represented in the assessment, for example, by incorporating images of the Southeast Alaskan environment and allowing for multiple forms of expression. Students taking the assessment are provided with scaffolds as needed, and the primary objective of the assessment is to support learners as they advance in their language proficiency rather than judging them against rigid expectations.

WIDA's partnership with the TCLL program exemplifies a model of collaboration grounded in respect, reciprocity, and cultural humility. WIDA staff participated as allies throughout the development of the Lingít X'axaa.áxch assessment, helping document, refine, and support the scalability of an assessment that is authentically Tlingit. Together, WIDA and the TCLL program explored how to define different levels of proficiency and design an asset-based assessment that honors the richness of the Tlingit language and affirms each student's language development.

Lingít X'axaa.áxch is not simply a classroom tool; it is a mirror of cultural continuity and change. For the students enrolled in the TCLL program, it sends a powerful message: Your language matters, your identity is important, and your voice in the Tlingit language is worthy of being heard, honored, and celebrated.



Credit: Sealaska Heritage Institute

Why Collaboration With Indigenous Communities and Nations Is Central to WIDA's Mission

At its core, WIDA is committed to supporting the academic success of multilingual learners by recognizing and building on their unique linguistic, cultural, and experiential assets. For Indigenous learners, these assets are inseparable from their languages, histories, and identities. Sustaining and revitalizing Indigenous languages is not only an educational goal, but also a matter of sovereignty and community wellbeing (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). This understanding makes authentic collaboration with Indigenous communities and nations a central, non-negotiable pillar of WIDA's work.

Indigenous languages embody ways of knowing and being that extend beyond vocabulary and grammar. They carry oral traditions, ecological knowledge, governance systems, and cultural practices that have sustained communities for generations (Paris & Alim, 2017; Russell, 2023). When these languages are minimized, Indigenous students can experience a disconnection from identity, heritage, and community cohesion, impacting their self-esteem and academic engagement (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Morcom, 2017). On the other hand, when schools affirm and sustain these languages and cultures, they contribute to healing historical harm, nurturing resilience, and supporting academic success (Baker-Bell, 2020; Vreeland, 2023).

WIDA's collaborations, such as those with California Indian Education for All, the Lower Kuskokwim School District, and Sealaska Heritage Institute, demonstrate how partnerships grounded in respect, reciprocity, relevance, and responsibility can create lasting change. These projects prioritize Indigenous leadership and decision making, from the design of culturally grounded Yugtun and Tlingit language assessments, to the creation of open-access repositories of tribally informed educational resources that counter conventional narratives and stereotypes.

Partnerships succeed when they are rooted in trust, transparency, and relational accountability. When collaborating with Indigenous communities, this may mean slowing timelines to match community rhythms, aligning goals with local priorities, and co-creating tools that affirm community values and worldview. It also requires an asset-based approach that centers students' strengths and capabilities rather than deficit narratives. WIDA's role in these partnerships is not to prescribe solutions but to walk alongside communities, providing technical expertise when requested, supporting capacity-building, and amplifying community-led solutions in research, policy, and practice.

By embedding collaboration with Indigenous communities into research, professional learning, and assessment development, WIDA helps to shift educational systems toward cultural sustainability. This approach reinforces the belief that multilingualism, especially in Indigenous languages, is a foundational strength to be celebrated and expanded, not a barrier to be overcome. Through this approach, WIDA advances its mission while helping to safeguard the linguistic and cultural variety that enriches our collective future.

Looking Ahead: Considerations for Sustainable Partnerships With and for Indigenous Communities and Nations

Sustaining meaningful partnerships with Indigenous communities requires more than project-based collaboration. It calls for enduring commitments established around trust, shared purpose, and mutual benefit (Bowman-Farrell et al., 2025; Wilson, 2008). Looking forward, WIDA's work will continue to center Indigenous sovereignty, prioritize local leadership, and invest in strategies that support long-term language and culture revitalization.

A commitment to sustaining these partnerships includes

1. Honoring sovereignty and self-determination: Future work must ensure that Indigenous nations lead decision making on curriculum, assessment, and research priorities. This affirms their right to autonomy while ensuring that initiatives reflect community-defined goals.
2. Participating in community-led capacity-building work: Lasting change depends on equipping local educators, linguists, and youth with the skills, tools, and resources to continue language and cultural work independently.
3. Ensuring cultural and linguistic relevance: Materials, assessments, and professional learning should align with local languages, traditions, and values, avoiding one-size-fits-all models. This includes embedding place-based and intergenerational learning approaches.
4. Practicing cultural humility and reciprocity: WIDA's role will remain that of a respectful partner, ready to listen, adapt, and give back in ways that communities identify as valuable.
5. Securing sustainable funding: Long-term initiatives require reliable funding sources that are flexible enough to accommodate community timelines and evolving needs.

By honoring these commitments, WIDA strengthens its partnerships and amplifies Indigenous voices. In doing so, WIDA helps foster educational systems where Indigenous students thrive academically while remaining deeply connected to their languages and cultures. This ongoing work not only upholds WIDA's mission, but also supports Indigenous communities in advancing meaningful educational practices, asserting their right to self-determination in education, and promoting cultural vitality.

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Considerations for Educators Serving Indigenous Students in Their Classroom

How can we create classrooms where Indigenous students, languages, and cultures truly flourish? This Q&A tool is designed as a practical resource for educators seeking to deepen their practice. The following answers are offered as starting points for reflection, all grounded in the core principles of respect, collaboration, and cultural humility.

Part 1: Creating a Culturally Responsive Classroom

Q: How can educators ensure their teaching honors Indigenous languages and cultures?

A: Educators are encouraged to recognize that language and culture are inseparable from identity. They can integrate students' languages and cultural knowledge into lessons by drawing on local examples, stories, and perspectives, and collaborate with Elders or cultural experts to bring authentic voices into the classroom.

Q: How can educators adapt instruction to be culturally relevant?

A: Educators can incorporate place-based and community-driven content into curriculum. Lessons that reflect students' lived experiences and the surrounding natural and cultural environment help make learning more meaningful and affirming.

Q: How can educators make classroom materials more inclusive of Indigenous perspectives?

A: Educators are encouraged to review textbooks, visuals, and digital resources for accuracy, authenticity, and representation. Including materials created by Indigenous authors and artists ensures students encounter narratives and knowledge that reflect their cultures and histories.

Q: How can educators balance curriculum standards with cultural priorities?

A: Indigenous students may benefit when educators align required standards with Indigenous knowledge systems. For example, a science standard on ecosystems can be taught through traditional ecological knowledge shared by local knowledge keepers.

Q: How can educators address stereotypes and bias in the classroom?

A: Educators can proactively challenge stereotypes by teaching accurate histories, highlighting diverse Indigenous achievements, and facilitating respectful discussions. Encouraging critical thinking about media portrayals and promoting counter-narratives helps students recognize and reject bias.

Part 2: Nurturing Student Identity and Wellbeing

Q: How should assessment be approached for Indigenous students?

A: Educators are encouraged to consider assessments that reflect community values, such as oral storytelling, demonstrations, or project-based work. Collaborating with local educators can help ensure that assessments measure what matters to the community and affirm student strengths.

Q: How can educators create an asset-based learning environment?

A: Indigenous students will benefit when educators focus on strengths, resilience, and cultural wealth. Avoiding deficit-based language and highlighting skills, knowledge, and perspectives can enrich the learning community.

Q: How can educators support the wellbeing of Indigenous students in the classroom?

A: Educators are encouraged to create a safe, welcoming environment that recognizes the impacts of historical and intergenerational trauma. Incorporating social-emotional learning strategies, offering culturally relevant mental health supports, and ensuring students feel seen and respected can help foster a strong sense of belonging.

Part 3: Building Authentic Partnerships

Q: What is the best way for educators to build trust with Indigenous students and families?

A: Trust develops when educators invest time in relationships. This may include learning about the community's history, values, and protocols; attending cultural events; listening actively; and following through on commitments. Consistent, respectful interactions over time strengthen these connections.

Q: How can educators involve families in students' learning?

A: Building strong school-family partnerships may include inviting families to share stories, language, and cultural practices in the classroom; holding events in community spaces; and using communication methods that align with family preferences and cultural norms.

Q: What role does cultural humility play in teaching Indigenous students?

A: Cultural humility involves being open to learning, acknowledging what is not known, and adapting based on feedback. Educators should strive to listen to rather than speak over Indigenous voices and respect the authority of Indigenous educators, Elders, and community leaders.

Q: How can partnerships with Indigenous communities be sustained?

A: Long-term collaboration rather than one-time projects can strengthen trust and impact. Educators can engage in ongoing partnerships, share resources, and maintain open communication to ensure mutual benefits.

Q: Why is respecting Indigenous sovereignty important in education?

A: Respecting sovereignty means involving Indigenous nations and communities in decisions about curriculum, language use, and representation, and honoring their protocols and priorities. This affirms their right to self-determination in education and supports culturally sustaining practices.



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