

# Navajo Immersion in the Navajo Nation

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Window Rock Unified School District located at the capitol of the Navajo Nation in Arizona is providing for the unique cultural and academic related needs of Navajo children by reverting back to the historic values of Diné (Navajo) language and culture and using the knowledge from traditional Diné education to produce increased academic achievement of our students.

Tséhootsooí Diné Bi'ólta' (Diné Language Immersion School) is one of the six schools operated by the district. It uses the immersion model in grades K-6 as a Diné language revitalization and maintenance effort among families served by the school district. Parents must choose to put

their children in the immersion school where in kindergarten and first grade the language of instruction in all content areas is Navajo. Starting in second grade, English instruction is added until in sixth grade; fifty percent of the instruction is in English. The Navajo Nation's *Diné Cultural Content Standards* are coupled with Arizona's state academic standards as the framework for instruction in which Diné language is predominantly used as the language of instruction, resulting in students who are speakers and thinkers in Diné while meeting state academic expectations and standards in English.

The main goal of Tséhootsooí Diné Bi'ólta' is to maintain and/or

revitalize the Diné (Navajo) language among school age children within the communities the Window Rock Unified School District serves, through a culturally and linguistically relevant educational program, and its primary focus is oral language proficiency. It enrolls approximately 200 students taught by 15 Diné language teachers instructing only in Diné while three English language teachers instruct only in English, allowing for the use of the Diné Language if necessary.

At all grade levels content instruction is based upon the integration of the Navajo Nation's Diné cultural content standards with the Arizona state academic standards in reading, writing, math, foreign language as well

Figure 1  
3rd Grade Student Achievement Data Comparison  
THTILC 2004

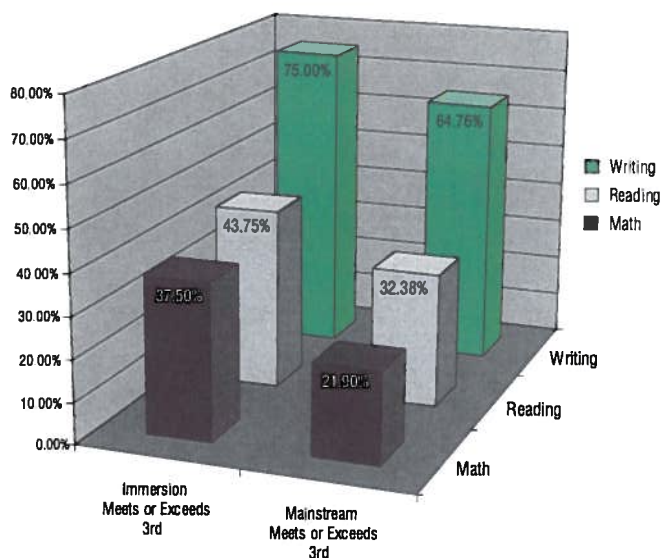
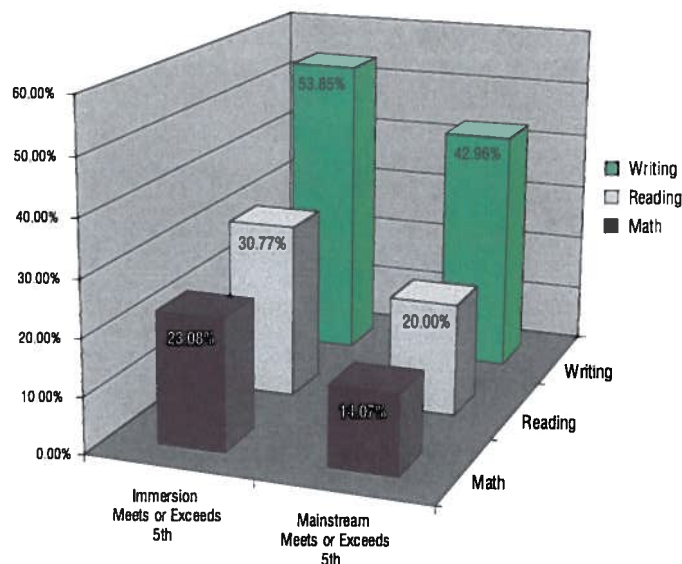


Figure 2  
5th Grade Student Achievement Data Comparison  
THTILC 2004



as science and social studies. This relates to the district's vision of being "an exemplary student-centered learning organization reflecting the Diné values of life-long learning."

The immersion school cannot make modifications in the administration of the state assessments, yet data shows that Diné language immersion students outperform their mainstream peers on the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS). The 2004 scores of immersion and non-immersion students attending Window Rock Unified School District on the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) criterion referenced test that is mandated by the state are shown in Figures 1 and 2. Table 1 summarizes the lessons learned since the first kindergarten Diné immersion classroom was started in 1986. *NN*

**Table 1:**  
**Lessons Learned from Navajo Immersion at Window Rock**

**WHAT WORKS:**

- Learning Diné Language (speaking, reading and writing) helps the students to increase skills in English
- Exposure to Diné Language increases language learning providing a language base for academic learning
- Using Diné language to learn state academic standards increases rate of Diné language learning
- Constant exposure to Diné culture provides a feedback system to Diné language learning
- Using and reflecting on student's life experiences makes learning relevant for students
- The use of Diné language and integrating the Diné culture validates students' identity
- Standards Based System (Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, Grading, Reporting)

**RESULTS:**

- Language Proficiency in Diné /English
- Literacy in Diné/English
- Retention & High School Graduation Rate
- Teacher Retention
- Family Involvement in Responsibility for student learning
- Culture Knowledge
- Diné values
- Language Revitalization/Maintenance

**WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE:**

- Use of Diné (Heritage) language as medium of instruction
- Consistent integration of Diné (heritage) culture in instruction
- Strong parent involvement motivates student learning (child & parents learning together)
- Visionary leadership

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