
PENOBSCOT INDIAN NATION



Project Title: Penobscot Language Revitalization Project

Award Amount: \$258,611

Type of Grant: Language

Project Period: 9/30/2003 – 3/31/2006

Grantee Type: Tribe

PROJECT SUMMARY

- 3 jobs created
- \$10,000 in resources leveraged
- 4 language teachers trained
- 13 partnerships formed
- 5 products developed
- 5 Native American consultants hired
- 37 youth increased their ability to speak a Native language
- 24 adults increased their ability to speak a Native language
- 3 adults achieved fluency in a Native language
- 10 elders involved
- 100 youth involved

BACKGROUND

The Penobscot Nation owns approximately 148,525 acres of land in Maine. Tribal Headquarters is located on Indian Island Reservation near Old Town, Maine. The Penobscot Nation Reservation has a population of 562. In total, 2,194 members are enrolled in the Tribe. The native language of the Penobscot Indian Nation is a dialect of the Eastern Algonquian language.

In 2002, the Penobscot community had three elders, one male in his 70s and two females in their 90s, fluent in the Penobscot language. Although the elders were too old to participate actively in a language program, there were four middle-aged speakers that were near-fluent and had the ability to actively participate. The Penobscot Tribe feared the language would die out if youth were not more involved in learning the language. The challenge Penobscot faced was the lack of interest many youth had in learning their language.

PROJECT PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The Tribe hoped that language programs could be created that would entice youth to learn the language and would show them the value of their language and culture. The purpose of the Penobscot Language Revitalization Project was to create a bilingual community wherein the Native Penobscot language would be used alongside English.

The Project consisted of two programs: a master apprentice program and a language immersion program. The master apprentice program paired fluent elder speakers with high school students. The goal was to improve the language skills of the students

to a point where they could staff the language immersion activities. Hiring and retaining apprentices became difficult. Some of the apprentices had difficulty maintaining a high level of participation during the school year due to other activities and responsibilities. Only two apprentices maintained an active participation in the Project, although the original plan called for five apprentices. This caused many delays when the apprentices were not available to participate in language activities. The Project attempted to overcome a lack of apprentices by increasing the administrative support provided by the Tribal Language Department.

Language immersion programs were implemented. The Project conducted one wilderness camp and two summer family immersion camps during the life of the grant, although the original plan was for one wilderness camp and four immersion camps. Instead of ten participating families, there were five to six participating families. After school family language immersion programs were attempted, but were not successful. To compensate for the lack of participation, the grantee developed other language activities. Penobscot Days taught both language and culture. Classes in the day care, elementary school and Boys and Girls Club were held. Brown bag language lunches were sponsored. A web camera was to be installed to provide language exposure, but due to an unexpected move to a different building this activity was not completed. The Project did provide language exposure through an interactive website and computers, however, it did not determine if participants received ten hours of direct exposure to native language as originally planned.

PROJECT OUTCOMES AND IMPACT ON COMMUNITIES

Before this Project, the Penobscot language was considered an almost extinct language. This Project has not fulfilled all of its planned activities, but over 60 Tribal members increased their ability to use the language. Four adults have reached fluency in the Penobscot language, and the language is now being taught in a number of strategic settings. Language immersion camps have successfully continued beyond the grant's funded timeline. Language activities are continuing in the Penobscot Boys and Girls Club, the Indian Island School, the Indian Island Day Care Center and throughout Tribal departments. One language immersion camp participant stated that this Project has helped the speakers and students of the Penobscot language and it has successfully brought the language back into the community. By providing the Penobscot community, and particularly its youth, the opportunity to learn their language and culture, the Tribe's culture and language will be preserved and will continue to be integrated into everyday life.

This Project also strengthened families through community involvement activities. More families are becoming involved in the language program and have benefited from language immersion camps and other activities as they provide time together without the distractions of the outside world. This has helped families to strengthen their relationships. Edwina Mitchell, a fluent speaker who was asked to assist in this Project, felt that the immersion camps are a place that people call "home" because they hear and speak their ancestors' language there. She has participated in this Project because she hopes that through this experience the history of her language will continue into the future.