

**NINA MOINI:** In Minnesota, high school students can earn college credit for proficiency in a language besides English. The Minnesota Bilingual Seals Program has been around since 2014 to help recognize multilingualism as an asset.

32 languages are part of the program, but this year, the first student was awarded a world language proficiency certificate for Ojibwe. Tecumseh Fahrlander is a senior at Hinckley-Finlayson High School and is a member of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. Thanks for being with us, Tecumseh.

**TECUMSEH** Thank you for having me too.

**FAHRLANDER:**

**NINA MOINI:** We're also very glad to be joined by Annie Huberty, who is the director of American Indian Education at the Minnesota Department of Education. Thanks for your time as well, Annie.

**ANNIE** Good morning. Thanks for having me.

**HUBERTY:**

**NINA MOINI:** Well, for starters, Tecumseh, congratulations on this big accomplishment. You're going to get some college credit for it. What did it feel like to be awarded this certificate?

**TECUMSEH** It felt very good because nobody else has-- I was the first person to get a certificate for something like this in my

**FAHRLANDER:** own language, so it felt very-- it felt very good that finally someone like me, a Native American, has finally been recognized for speaking his own language.

**NINA MOINI:** Were you surprised, Tecumseh, when you heard that you were the first?

**TECUMSEH** It definitely did make me a little surprised, because I had thought maybe somebody in the past had gotten it, but

**FAHRLANDER:** it wasn't. It was pretty revealing.

**NINA MOINI:** Yeah. Where were you, proficiency wise, with the Ojibwe language before you started to study in this way? Did you grow up with family members who were around you speaking the language or what was your exposure like before?

**TECUMSEH** I went to a charter school out in Wisconsin that basically made you speak Ojibwe all day, and that's how I got

**FAHRLANDER:** exposed to it.

**NINA MOINI:** Cool. Did you feel like it was different studying it in this kind of a context, or did it just make sense for you in the progression of how you were learning the language?

**TECUMSEH** It kind of felt like both, because I had never studied this way or it never had-- I studied this way because I didn't

**FAHRLANDER:** go to high school there, [? inequivalent. ?] But now, it felt very normal just the way I learned it.

**NINA MOINI:** Annie, would you tell us a little bit more about the program, the Bilingual Seals Program? And why it's important to have various languages, Indigenous languages as part of it? And what Indigenous languages are part of it?

**ANNIE** Absolutely. So like you've mentioned, the Bilingual Seals Program through the Minnesota Department of

**HUBERTY:** Education started in 2014, and there are many languages that students are able to test for proficiency in.

And as far as Native or Indigenous languages, we currently have it for Dakota or Anishinaabe, and Anishinaabe is Ojibwe. And Tecumseh and one other student have been the first in the state to achieve this.

We've had one student that has achieved the proficiency certificate in Dakota and that was in school year 2020, 2021. And then this year, with Tecumseh being the first recipient in Ojibwe. The Native language revitalization in Minnesota has had huge support from our legislature and from the Minnesota Department of Education.

We currently are offering native language revitalization grants to districts that apply in the hopes that we are getting more Dakota and Anishinaabe language into the minds of learners across the state.

And while those grant funds are housed under the Office of American Indian Education, they are not specific only to Native American students. And so districts that are applying for these funds are able to offer Dakota and Anishinaabe languages to any students that are interested.

**NINA MOINI:** Annie, listening to Tecumseh talk about just learning the language throughout the K through 12 experience, just throughout education is so cool, and it feels very unique. And I think for people who've ever really desired to know a language that means a lot to them or culturally significant to them, it's like, wow, that is so cool.

Do you think that that level of exposure is necessary for others to be able to become proficient and to meet this starting point?

**ANNIE HUBERTY:** Absolutely. I think that because of the state of emergency that our Native languages are in, any exposure for a student is beneficial. Tecumseh definitely had an advantage coming from a very strong family of language speakers and learners. But then also with being in the school setting that he was in, by being able to be in an immersion based school, and to be able to practice it more frequently than others, definitely put him at an advantage and also just set him up for success.

And it definitely is a skill that needs to be practiced and used on a daily basis to achieve what he has.

**NINA MOINI:** Tecumseh, was it more conversation based, writing based? Can you tell us a little bit about what it was like in the class?

**TECUMSEH FAHRLANDER:** In the class, it was both. You would practice certain things, like math and other types of things, like maybe even geography, I can remember. And you'd write it down in Ojibwe somewhat.

**NINA MOINI:** So it was very, very immersive. Annie, what is it going to take to make sure there are even more students who are able to become proficient in whatever languages they desire but also these Indigenous languages that, as you say, are in a state of crisis?

**ANNIE HUBERTY:** Nina, we're at a critical moment. Language loss isn't abstract. When we lose speakers, we lose entire ways of understanding that culture. And with the languages that are Indigenous to Minnesota, we are losing language speakers faster than we're putting language speakers out.

We are in such a critical point right now of having any first language speakers that even in the last 10, 15 years we've lost, I mean, 90%, 95% of those first language speakers. And so many of the folks that are around today that speak Dakota and Anishinaabe are second language learners themselves.

And what is going to be the most impactful for students that are trying to learn is also putting out teachers and making sure that we have folks that are in position to help share that language. So it's a dual fold process.

We need people learning just as quick as we need people that are able to turn around and to help teach and to help share that knowledge.

**NINA MOINI:** And I'll just throw the last question to you here, Tecumseh. Have you thought about what comes next, college wise or after high school, and how you might want to incorporate just these language skills into what you pursue?

**TECUMSEH** I'm definitely trying to go to college. It's going to take a little bit because I want to go to U of M, but I may have to  
**FAHRLANDER:** stay at home for a year or two, doing online stuff. But definitely in the things that how I learned Ojibwe will help me in trying to learn maybe other languages or maybe other certain topics that I think that can be very beneficial for other topics, such as language and whatnot.

**NINA MOINI:** Absolutely. Well, I want to thank you both so much for your time, and I wish you both the very best. Thanks so much.

**TECUMSEH** Thank you.

**FAHRLANDER:**

**ANNIE** Thanks for your time, Nina. And congratulations again, Tecumseh.

**HUBERTY:**

**NINA MOINI:** Congratulations.

**TECUMSEH** Thank you very much.

**FAHRLANDER:**

**NINA MOINI:** Tecumseh Fahrlander is a senior at Hinckley-Finlayson High School, and Annie Huberty is the director of American Indian Education for the state.