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The Wampanoag Language Reclamation Project staff meets in their offices in Summerfield Park last week. Clockwise from left, language apprentices Brian Weeden and Tia Pocknett, founder and program director Jessie “Little Doe” Baird, curriculum & language specialists Tracy Kelley and Nitana Hicks, Jennifer Weston, charter and personnel coordinator, and Eleanor Coombs, language apprentice.

As Founder Shifts To Tribal Politics, Creators Of Language School Adapt

By ELSA H. PARTAN

For the first time in 20 years, Jessie C. Baird has no doubt that the effort to bring back the language of the Wampanoag people will succeed, with or without her.

“I can honestly say that if something happens to me, the project can continue,” said Ms. Baird (Little Doe) in a recent interview.

“We will open a charter school. There will be more and more speakers.”

As Ms. Baird turns her attention to her new position as vice chairman of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Council, it is also a new chapter for the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project, which has been synonymous with

Ms. Baird since she started the painstaking process of reviving the language in 1993.

When she began, Ms. Baird pored over the 300-year-old documents left behind by the previous speakers of Wôpanâak, a language that had fallen silent more

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than 100 years earlier. She and others developed classroom materials to teach the language and began leading community classes. She earned a master's degree in linguistics from Massachusetts Institute of Technology along the way and won a "genius grant" from John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in 2010.

Even with all her success, year after year of uncertain funding left Ms. Baird wondering how the language could possibly grow.

That question has all but evaporated. In late September, the federal Administration for Native Americans granted the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project a three-year, \$900,000 grant to develop a public charter school for kindergarten through grade 3 that will be taught in the Wôpanâak language.

Indigenous communities from New Zealand to Hawaii have successfully resurrected their languages by teaching it to youngsters in schools set up for that purpose. The Wampanoags can do the same, Ms. Baird reasoned.

To establish a public charter school, the team of nine part-time workers must create a curriculum and prepare more than a hundred pages of documents by July 2014 to be considered. If approved by the state, the new publicly-funded school would open to all in the summer of 2015.

The team estimates that there will be 183 Wampanoag children from Barnstable County, Plymouth County, Bristol County, and Martha's Vineyard who will be the right age to attend. It assumes that not every child will apply. As a public charter school, admission must be by lottery and open to all applicants.

Charter School On Track

In its first seven months, the charter school staff has already gathered a 15-member governing board of directors. Those members, who are scattered across the continental United States and Hawaii, offer skills in the areas of law, marketing, fundraising, education, government, engineering, historical preservation, and second language acquisition, among other areas.

"It's a great board," said Judi G. Urquhart, who is one of the charter school board members and the project administrator. "We wanted a broad base of people with a lot of skill sets."

So far, the board has drafted a preliminary vision statement, school bylaws, a school enrollment policy, an application for enrollment, and a recruitment and retention policy.

"Our time line is being met," Ms. Urquhart said.

Bolstered by the progress of the charter school team, Ms. Baird ran for vice chairman of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Council in February and won. Years earlier, she had considered running for office but put it off because, "it wasn't time yet," she said. Once she saw that the charter school staff was moving forward with confidence, it was time.

When the grant started in the



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Language apprentices Brian Weeden and Tia Pocknett work on some classroom aids for learning the days of the week, the months of the year, and different types of weather. The two are part of a team preparing an application for a Wôpanâak language charter school for kindergarten through grade 3.

fall, Ms. Baird was paid for about 10 hours of work a week, and she donated many more hours of her time to the project. When she was elected to Tribal Council in February, she continued to work 10 hours a week. She also continued to donate additional time, but less than before, she said. Now translation questions from staff often come to her by text message and e-mail.

Ms. Baird's reduced hours have been felt by other staff members. Still, they are adjusting to the change and pushing forward with their work, according to Nitana C. Hicks, the curriculum specialist on the project.

"We have a team that can do this," Ms. Hicks said.

For Ms. Hicks, the result of Ms. Baird's election has been that the other staff members ask her translation questions that earlier they would have asked Ms. Baird. Ms. Hicks, who is probably the most advanced speaker of Wôpanâak on staff after Ms. Baird, holds a master's degree in linguistics from MIT and is working toward a PhD in education at Boston College.

"There is a lot of stuff I can do, but at least once a day I write something down to ask her," Ms. Hicks said.

To get Ms. Hicks back to the work of drafting the curriculum rather than answering language questions, the charter school team will apply for a grant from the Commonwealth Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development to hire another advanced speaker of Wôpanâak who is not currently on staff.

A School Like No Other

Even with the interruptions, Ms. Hicks has led the team in choosing a curriculum framework. By all accounts, it will be a charter school unlike any other in the state. It will have a project-based curriculum anchored in Wampanoag knowledge, Ms. Hicks said. In the fall, lessons will be linked to deer hunting, while the spring herring migration will offer lessons in the life cycle of fish.

"Naturally, that part of the curriculum will be science-heavy," Ms. Hicks said.

Lessons in history, citizenship, and Wampanoag values represent standards that all students must meet.

"It is important that we start with the Wampanoag standards and then bring in the state standards after that, so that we ensure this is a Wampanoag school," Ms. Hicks said.

In the last few months, Wampanoag tribe members have helped the charter school team by offering their cultural knowledge, which is being used to craft the lessons.

The team has chosen a year-round schedule rather than the usual September-to-June school year. Students will end up with the same 180 days of school that other students get, but there will be shorter, more numerous breaks.

"It will be more supportive of language learning," Ms. Hicks said. "But also, culturally, there are a lot of things we want to teach that would get skipped with the usual school schedule."

The team is writing an opening address of the guiding principles of the school, which students will recite every day.

Ms. Baird Remains Influential

As Ms. Baird hands over more responsibility to the other charter school staff, she insists that the language reclamation project was never a one-woman effort from the beginning.

"It never was just me," she said. "That's not even humanly possible. You can't have a language with one speaker. A lot of people have been working on this for a long time."

Even so, Ms. Baird remains influential to the work and an important ally, according to Ms. Hicks.

"There isn't one person who is as connected and a part of it as she is," she said. "She really just looks out for its best interest more than anyone else does."

When Ms. Baird is not present during a discussion, the rest of the team thinks about what she would say or do, Ms. Hicks said.

"Even if she's not explicitly driving the process, she's still there."