



Tribal language charter school inches forward

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MASHPEE – A proposed charter school designed to immerse young children in the Wopanaak language is in the mix for state approval this year, but organizers are still waiting for an invite to make their pitch.

The Weetumuw Wopanaak Charter School is part of the Wopanaak Language Reclamation Project, which aims to preserve and revitalize the native tongue of the Wampanoag ancestors. The school will start with a group of kindergarten and first-grade students and eventually run through the fifth grade and enroll up to 100 students, said charter developer Jennifer Weston. Four of the school day's six hours will be taught in Wopanaak, with an English/language arts segment being the only exception.

The Language Reclamation Project was one of seven groups that submitted a prospectus to the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education this summer. The department will examine the documents and decide which programs, if any, will move on to the final application stage.

Weston, who is a Lakota from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, said part of the final application stage would include public meetings in the school's target coverage area, which for the Weetumuw Wopanaak Charter School is most districts in Barnstable, Bristol, Dukes and Plymouth counties.

"That gives our founding group an opportunity to bring in potential members to speak, and it gives the local community a chance to ask questions," Weston said.

The school's reach encompasses four Wampanoag tribes and communities: the Assonet Band of Wampanoag, the Aquinnah Wampanoag Tribe, the Herring Pond Wampanoag Tribe and the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe. Since it is applying to be a public charter school, however, the school can't limit enrollment to tribal members and will be open to all children in the target districts.

The state is expected to make its decisions from the final round of applicants by early February, Weston said.

As the charter school organizers wait on word from the state, they're still looking for a place to call home when, and if, the school opens. Weston said they have evaluated a number of sites, including one in Falmouth, but the decision hasn't been finalized. Wherever the school building ends up, it will need approval from local zoning boards and selectmen before it can house children.

The Wampanoag language was spoken by tens of thousands of people in southeastern New England when 17th-century Puritan missionaries learned the language, rendered it phonetically in the Roman alphabet and used it to translate the King James Bible and other religious texts for the purposes of conversion and literacy promotion. Wopanaak ceased to be spoken by the mid-19th century and was preserved only in written language.

Jessie "Little Doe" Baird, vice chairwoman of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, founded the Wampanoag Language Reclamation Project in 1993.

Follow Sean Driscoll on Twitter: @seanfdriscoll.

MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about the Wopanaak Language Reclamation Project and the charter school plans, visit www.wlrp.org.

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