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EDUCATION

Native students in Brown County face a reading 'crisis.' This group wants to change that.



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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

Oneida Reads, a multi-part initiative launched in August 2024, aims to address the low reading proficiency among Native American students in Brown County.

Only 5% of Native third-graders tested proficient in reading during the 2021-22 school year, prompting the Oneida Nation to take action.

The program partners with local schools and organizations to provide tutoring and other resources, focusing on kindergarten readiness, attendance, reading instruction, and out-of-school learning.

In a tiny room at Oneida Community Library in mid-July, a lively bingo game kicked off.

“Draft.” “Grant.” “As — I have it, I have it!”

Victoria Shoning, 6, found the word on her reading bingo sheet, placing a Cat in the Hat sticker while her tutor, Orleana Batiste, smiled. Batiste didn't have it, but she took an extra sticker for luck. Victoria did the same.

“I want good luck very badly,” Victoria said.

Since she started working with Batiste, Victoria has had plenty of good luck, said her mom, Tammy Shoning. In the past, she struggled with reading, but the one-on-

one support has kept her from falling behind over the summer. Come this fall, she'll have a tutor at her school.

Victoria isn't alone. Native students learning to read in Brown County face a major equity gap, with only 5% of third-graders achieving proficiency on reading exams in the 2021-22 school year. That's 38 percentage points lower than White students in the same year.

That's why, in August 2024, Oneida Nation leaders launched Oneida Reads, a multi-part initiative to raise awareness of the gap and engage with families to improve student outcomes. By working with local school districts and other community resources, they're targeting reading instruction, attendance and school readiness.

"A 5% reading proficiency rate, it is a crisis," said Ann McCotter, Oneida Reads project and change lead. "We don't feel like giving it more time to play out."

The initiative celebrated its first anniversary Aug. 1. Leaders are hoping they'll see student test scores for this year increase when data comes out in October.

The origins of Oneida Reads

Native students' reading proficiency can fly under the radar due to a quirk in how Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction records data. When demographic groups are so small that individual students' results could be identified, DPI withholds data. In Brown County, this often means that data on Native students and Pacific Islander aren't publicly reported.

Oneida Reads partnered with DPI to get data for the county. What they found was concerning: In the 2021-22 school year, only 5% of Native third-graders in Brown County public schools were reading proficiently at grade level, McCotter said. Statewide, that number was 14%. For McCotter, that points to a systemic issue.

"All this is stating there's a real issue, an opportunity and something we need to work on," McCotter said.

She and her colleagues on Oneida's higher education team started ringing alarm bells. When Oneida Councilwoman Jennifer Webster heard about the issue in one of the team's presentations, she agreed. Within weeks, she'd become the "community champion" for Oneida Reads, raising awareness wherever she can.

"(Reading) wasn't always front and center, and I think that's where Oneida Reads needs to be, is front and center," Webster said. "To remind parents to spend that time with their kids reading. Every little bit helps."

A multifaceted approach to a multifaceted problem

Oneida Reads focuses on kindergarten readiness, school attendance, reading instruction and out-of-school learning. It's a multifaceted approach to a multifaceted problem, McCotter said.

To take it on, they've enlisted dozens of community partners, including school districts, [reading support organizations](#), federal Health and Human Services committees, even the Packers Foundation. Oneida Reads leaders go to farmers markets, set up events in schools and host town halls on the issue.

"It's not the best thing you want to talk about with your tribe, that our children are reading at a lesser grade level than our counterparts," Webster said. "But I think if you hear that message, you're a little bit more likely to (say), 'hey, maybe I need to sit down and read to my kids a little bit more often.'"

In partnerships with school districts, Oneida Reads' Youth Enrichment Services Program brings reading specialists and student liaisons into schools, helping connect the tribe's students with supports like tutoring and cultural connection. Batiste, Victoria's tutor, is one of them.

During the school year, Batiste works as a high school advocate, helping students meet their social-emotional needs and making sure they're on track to graduate. But this summer, she took on a new challenge: teaching elementary students to read.

Through educational support agency CESA 7's partnership with Oneida Reads, Batiste learned to teach a science-based reading curriculum many schools now use. Now, she and several other Oneida employees have taken those skills and put them into practice, one 30-minute summer tutoring session at a time.

"We don't want the kids coming back and being further behind," Batiste said. "So these students will either be ahead, or they'll still be in the right place when they come back to school."

About 40 students are participating in Oneida Reads' summer reading programs, and around 30 are receiving one-on-one tutoring like Victoria is, all at no cost to Oneida families.

Right now, McCotter and Webster don't know exactly what the first year of data post-Oneida Reads will show. The equity gap closed slightly between 2021-22 and 2023-24, from 38 percentage points to 35, but they're hoping to see more of a change as the program continues.

"I think our community understands the goal, and I think our community also understands that this isn't going to happen overnight," Webster said. "They also understand that we're all in it for the long haul."

But for now, kids like Victoria are already seeing the benefits.

"At first, she was super, super nervous, and she actually hated the idea because reading is a struggle for her," her mom said. "But since she got here, she loves working with Orleana, and she's really enjoyed it."

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