

Indigenous Learning Recovery in Pohnpei, FSM

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Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) launched our Indigenous Learning Recovery (ILR) project with a *sakau* ceremony at Saladak Elementary School in U Municipality on November 10, 2020. This partnership between PREL, the Pohnpei State Department of Education (PDOE), and the Saladak community was to pilot a program to support the development of education pathways for youth that preserve traditional knowledge and skills and strengthen community involvement in schools. With ongoing support from the Nia Tero Foundation, ILR continues each school year and PREL has expanded the program to include over 1,000 students in grades four to eleven and 42 elders in six schools across Pohnpei. Here, we present lessons learned on how we are building and sustaining partnerships with communities and schools to replant and cultivate intergenerational learning.

Project Background

PREL's ILR program launched as an opportunity for public school students to learn traditional language and skills directly from their community elders and to deepen their identity and understanding of their

roles in their community. The work to develop the project aligns with education policy set by the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) in which states are expected to provide students with an education that develops citizens that are ready to make societal and economic contributions, among other responsibilities, and “**preserve Micronesian culture and traditions.**”¹ Additionally, ILR supports the operation of Goal 5 under the *FSM Education Sector Strategic Development Plan (2020–2024)* to **ensure that education is relevant to the life and aspirations of the people of the FSM**, in part by sustaining the social and cultural foundations of the FSM and improve the employability of all learners.²



Figure 1: Saladak elders teaching students a traditional dance from U.

¹ Educational System 40 FSMC § 101. <https://www.fsmlaw.org/fsm/code/PDF/FSMCA2014Tit40.pdf>.

² FSM NDOE, Federated States of Micronesia National Department of Education. (2020). *Education Sector Strategic Development Plan (2020 – 2024)*. <https://www.globalpartnership.org/content/education-sector-strategic-development-plan-2020-2024-federated-states-micronesia>.

Elders engage students in lessons on traditional skills and knowledge during the last hour of school for three days a week over six months. Topics varied across schools depending on elder knowledge and included *meing* (honorific language); *soai poad* (storytelling); traditional farming practices; roles and protocols in the *nahs* (community house); *perper* (wood carving) and traditional tools (like *kodering*, *pwai*, *ngarangar*, *piled*); traditional dances and *ngihs* (chants); *peipei* (weaving) *pwah/dahl* (food plates), *kiam* (woven baskets), *lepin kiam*, *ro*, *kepwou/mwaramwar*.

At the end of the school year, each school holds community showcases to demonstrate students' skills to families, community leaders, and government leaders. In the weeks leading up to final showcases, elders, school staff, students, and family members volunteer more time to prepare materials the students will need, especially this past year when we brought all five schools together for one big event sponsored by the Pohnpei State government.

This year's ILR showcase turned into a state-wide Cultural Day event featuring our five participating schools in a float parade from the Pohnpei DOE central office to the Nett School *nahs*. The event was well attended by the *Nahnmwarki* of Nett and his wife, the Governor of Pohnpei and his wife, members of the state legislative and executive branches, members of the diplomatic corps, FSM Congress members, local government and traditional leaders, families and community members from our five schools in Kittu, U, and Nett.

What We Are Learning

Each year of the ILR project reveals new lessons learned on ways to sustain intergenerational culture-based learning programs and cultivate deeper collaboration between schools and communities in Pohnpei. Reflections from our pilot year were captured at: <https://bit.ly/PREL-ILRvideos>.

We continue to see that **students, families, schools, and communities are embracing their ILR programs with increased community presence at schools, and increased community engagement of students and classroom teachers with elders.** Evidence of this growth looks like:

- Classroom teachers are participating in ILR lessons alongside their students to support implementation and expand their own learning.
- ILR students have been invited to perform traditional dances at state and municipal government functions.



Figure 2: Parem students showcase a variety of weaving styles.

- Students are asked to weave for and participate in community funerals and feasts. One elder mentioned how proud she was to have her students weave with her at a recent funeral.
- The Parents & Teachers Association (PTA) of Wone supports the project by providing additional needed materials and encourage opportunities for students to share in the community.
- Parem initiated and conducted their own community showcase before the final presentation event this year.
- Families participate in preparing materials needed for lessons and are interacting more with students and teachers.

Our work continues to affirm small class sizes: **one elder to up to 25 students is a reasonable class size to ensure students and elders can interact effectively.** Additionally, **selected ILR elders are active community members**, knowledgeable in their traditional roles, and committed to sharing their skills beyond the scheduled lesson times. Many are active PTA members. Most of the elders who were selected to pilot the program are still participating in the program.

School principals' collaboration is essential in implementation and management of the project. Principals have been instrumental in the selection of elders, management of supplies and procurement, supervising of teachers' engagement in lessons, monitoring elder attendance and disbursement of honorariums provided to elders, and advocacy of the program in the communities.

Over the years, we have lost some of our elders and principals. Two elders and one principal passed away, a few elders have resigned due to deteriorating health, two of our principals have retired and a couple elders have moved abroad. **Written lessons allow for continuity.** Some elders provided written lessons that allowed classroom teachers and principals to take over classes until they returned or alternate instructors were selected.

We are working to expand the community's support into financial support for the project. Due to budget constraints this year, we paused the project at Madolenihmw High School to focus more on primary schools. However, there is still significant interest in the Madolenihmw community to continue ILR in the future. The project has been almost fully funded by Nia Tero since its inception in 2020. Our continued efforts to increase community ownership and financial support for ILR includes:

- Micronesian Conservation Trust (MCT) and local municipality administrations for our schools contributed funds for refreshments for the showcases.



Figure 3: Nett students create their own skirts for the upcoming community showcase.

- We are currently exploring continuation of the ILR program in Pohnpei and Kosrae to expand and include more schools as well as create materials (i.e. books, leaflets) in the local languages.

Pohnpei State Legislature members and representatives to the FSM Congress have been supportive and enthusiastic to learn that ILR has been in schools since SY2020. Last year, several members articulated the need to make the project more sustainable to preserve and continue Indigenous learning in schools by allocating funds; we are looking forward to future partnerships to make this commitment reality.

Why Indigenous Learning Work Needs to Continue

Increase relevance of education in FSM communities. Schooling in FSM generally prioritizes academic achievement with the goal of post-secondary study; however, graduation rates indicate a steep decline in enrollment after grade eight. In elementary, 83% of male students and 93% of female students who begin at grade one go on to enter grade eight, but then less than 60% of students who begin at grade nine stay in school through grade 12.³ Part of what may be contributing to the lack of interest in school after grade eight may be that vocational classes are not regularly offered. Classes like carpentry, mechanics, agriculture, home economics, and traditional

life skills like weaving, carving, and canoe-building are shown to be more appealing and effective for students who learn best through hands-on work.⁴ And even when available, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) classes are only offered in high school.⁵ Fairly high attendance in elementary school attendance can be an opportunity to encourage students to continue in school by exposing them to career options and pathways at earlier ages. Although ILR classes started only four years ago in a few schools, we are already seeing the impacts of increased relevance, as the increased community presence at schools has encouraged overall student attendance, as well as increased interest among classroom teachers to participate in ILR lessons and expand their own learning.

Support preservation of traditional skills. During the Pacific Peoples Forum in 2020, Micronesian youth community organizer Yolanda Joab Mori shared,

“If we really look to ourselves and to the holders of such indigenous–Yapese, Pohnpeian, Chuukese, Micronesian, Pasifika–knowledge, we find out that the common misconception that young people should not have a voice or women should not have a role in leadership, that’s not who we are...[We have] to unlearn pieces that have polluted who we really are and having to relearn true values of ours.”⁶

³ (FSM NDOE, 2020).

⁴ Plasman, J. S., & Gottfried, M. A. (2022). School absence in the United States: Understanding the role of STEM-related vocational education and training in encouraging attendance. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 74(4), 531-553.

⁵ (FSM NDOE, 2020).

⁶ Nia Tero Foundation. (2020, April 29). Pacific Peoples Forum - Yolanda Joab Mori. <https://www.niatero.org/stories/films/pacific-peoples-forum-yolanda-joab-mori>.

The impetus of ILR was a response to the gradual loss of traditional skills among youth in Pohnpei, as observed by PREL's partners at the Pohnpei State Department of Education and Micronesian youth community organizers like Yolanda. The focus of the education sector on secondary and post-secondary academic achievement has resulted in the loss of vocational classes, TVET teachers being designated as non-

essential and thus not considered for funding, a steady rise in student absenteeism, and a drop in parental engagement within the education realm, as many see the current system as irrelevant to their daily lives.⁷ The loss of traditional skills and knowledges also contributes to a loss of uniquely Micronesian perspectives on respect and equity, as referenced by Yolanda, that hold communities together.



Figure 4: Wone students learn a traditional dance about a special place in Kittu.

⁷ Hadik, P. (April 1, 2021). *Indigenous Education Project in Micronesia*.
<https://www.niatero.org/stories/articles/indigenous-education-project-in-micronesia>.