



NATIONAL INDIAN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

**Written Testimony of the National Indian Education Association  
for the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Listening Session on  
“Identifying Indian Country’s Native Languages Revitalization Priorities”**

*February 27, 2019*

**INTRODUCTION**

On behalf of the National Indian Education Association (NIEA), I respectfully submit the following written testimony in response to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Listening Session, entitled “Identifying Indian Country’s Native Language Revitalization Priorities” (Listening Session). NIEA is the nation’s largest and most inclusive organization advocating for comprehensive, culture-based educational opportunities for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians.

**THE FEDERAL TRUST RELATIONSHIP**

Congress has a federal trust responsibility for the education of Native students. Established through treaties, federal law, and U.S. Supreme Court decisions, the federal government’s trust responsibility to tribes includes the obligation to provide parity in access and equitable resources to all American Indian and Alaska Native students, regardless of where they attend school. Resources and funding to preserve and revitalize Native languages are a critical part of the federal trust responsibility, an obligation shared between the Congress and the Administration for federally-recognized tribes.

**NATIVE LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION IN THE NATIONAL LANDSCAPE**

Native languages are fundamental to the cultural fabric of Native identities. Interwoven into ceremonies, histories, and traditions, language is at the heart of Native cultures. Studies have shown that Native students thrive when Native language and culture is a core component of the classroom. Language preservation and revitalization programs are integral to ensuring that Native students have equitable access to opportunities for success through culturally relevant education options.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 74 Native languages are on track to disappear within the next decade, and only 20 Native languages will be spoken by 2050 without immediate action. In recognition of this troubling trend in the United States and around the world, UNESCO recognized 2019 as the

International Year of Indigenous Languages to celebrate Native language revitalization and preservation.

Tribes and Native communities are innovating to develop unique schools that pass Native languages to future generations through a rigorous academic program. During the Listening Session on February 13, Native educators, parents, and community leaders shared the impact of language and culture on education in their communities. However, resources and funding for such programs remain a challenge. Congress should strengthen and expand resources to support Native language revitalization, maintenance, and preservation to ensure equity in education for Native students.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Native language and culture-based education are critical to student achievement and success. NIEA provides the following recommendations to support thriving Native language programs and students for generations to come.

- **Reauthorize the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act** – Introduced in the Senate as S.256, the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Programs Reauthorization Act reauthorizes 2006 legislation that funds language immersion and restoration programs for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students. Funding provided under this Act has supported the development of tribal curricula, language assessments, and immersion programs to support and revive Native languages in schools across the country. Though this legislation passed the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on February 6, 2019, it has yet to pass the full Senate and there has been little traction on the House companion bill. NIEA urges congressional leaders fulfill the federal trust responsibility by passing this critical legislation.
- **Build and Expand Native Language Schools and Programs** – Schools and programs that utilize Native language immersion as the medium of instruction are critical to student success and language preservation in Native communities. Language immersion provides a foundation to build academic and cognitive skills for future success in a positive learning environment where Native students can thrive. Due to limited funding and resources, some tribes and Native communities lack the resources to replicate and expand successful models for language immersion and revitalization. Tribes and Native communities must have access to the tools necessary to exercise sovereignty in education through high-quality Native language schools and programs.
- **Support Assessments in the Native Language of Instruction** – High-quality, culturally relevant assessments are central to supporting student growth and achievement through language instruction. However, state and federal agencies have struggled to

construct testing mechanisms that appropriately assess students in the Native language of instruction due to the number of unique Native languages and lack of technical expertise outside of tribal communities. Tribes and Native communities must have the flexibility and resources to assess student learning and growth to ensure that Native students have access to excellent education opportunities. Consistent with the federal trust responsibility, NIEA recommends deference on Native language assessments be provided to tribes that operate Native immersion schools across the country.

- **Expand Pathways for Native Language Teacher Recruitment and Retention, including Native Teacher Preparation Programs** – An ongoing shortage of culturally responsive educators that are fluent in Native languages continues to challenge Native language schools and programs across the country. Though NIEA appreciates federal support to address teacher shortages in Native communities, immersion schools and programs require educators with specialized knowledge and fluency in Native languages. Some tribal communities have addressed shortages by creating teacher training and professional development programs that recruit fluent language speakers or train educators to speak Native languages. NIEA recommends that Congress support tribal teacher certification to ensure that Native students in immersion schools have access to equitable opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

Native language revitalization is critical to the well-being and success of Native students and communities for generations to come. Tribes, schools, and Native communities must have access to resources to build and strengthen Native languages to ensure student success. NIEA looks forward to working with you to ensure educational equity for the only students that the federal government has a direct responsibility to education—Native students.

Thank you for considering these comments for the record. If you have any questions, please contact Diana Cournoyer, NIEA Interim Executive Director, at [dcournoyer@niea.org](mailto:dcournoyer@niea.org).