

## **President Agoyo Statement on Native Languages**

Washington, DC – Every Native child should have the right to be educated in his or her own language. Today, we have the opportunity to make that a reality. Critical legislation is moving through Congress that will provide more Native children access to an education grounded in their language and culture. We must send a clear message to Congress that they pass S. 1948 – the Native Language Immersion Student Achievement Act – and S. 2299 – a bill to reauthorize the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act – in order to provide more opportunities for Native students to achieve.

Enacting these educational bills is critical as Native students are the future leaders of tribal nations and Native communities. Essentially, supporting our children today is the means to ensuring our communities thrive for generations. Native students must have the educational support systems in place that succeed in fostering academic and personal growth. These legislative measures would expand language immersion education systems that create success among our students. Unfortunately, the majority of education systems that serve Native students continue to fail in properly serving Native populations. Inadequate funding, unqualified teachers, and teaching models that exclude local cultures and languages are prevalent across the systems educating Native youth.

Now is the time to act and ensure education systems serve our students effectively, by recognizing that:

- Native languages and culture are inseparable and cannot be segregated from one another;
- There are significant academic benefits to comprehensive language immersion instruction;
- The free and full expression of Native religious, spiritual, and ceremonial ways of life is contingent on the promotion and revitalization of Native languages; and
- Native languages are critically endangered, irreplaceable, and necessary to the well-being and character of Native students, tribal nations, and the United States.

The National Indian Education Association (NIEA) has maintained for decades that it is our sacred duty and the federal government's trust responsibility to ensure our students have access to education systems that prepare them for success. Established through treaties, federal law, and U.S. Supreme Court decisions, the trust relationship between tribes and the federal government includes a fiduciary obligation to provide parity in access and equal resources to all American Indian and Alaska Native students. To provide our students the necessary resources, it is critical that education stakeholders and policy makers understand that Native languages and culture are inseparable from one another and should be supported through comprehensive, full-day language immersion education models.

Research finds that Native students achieve at higher rates when taught through comprehensive, full-day language immersion programs that incorporate environment, culture, and language. Native students with access to sustained, cumulative Native linguistic and cultural instruction perform as well as, or better than, their peers in mainstream classes when completing academically challenging tasks. Further, students who enter school understanding a primary language other than the school language (i.e., English) perform significantly better on academic tasks when they receive constant and cumulative academic support in the primary language for a minimum of four to seven years.

For example, longitudinal data from the Rough Rock English-Navajo Language Arts Program, which serves approximately 200 students each year in kindergarten through sixth grade, illustrates that after four

years in the program, average student scores on criterion-referenced tests of English comprehension increased from 58% to 91%. Comprehensive immersion programs, like that at the Rough Rock school, immerse the student in their language and culture, which contributes to improved attendance and college enrollment rates, lower attrition rates, and enhanced teacher-student and school-community relations.

Every Native student has the right to this type of education. It raises achievement and preserves a local culture and language. In a time when UNESCO reports that 74 Native languages stand to disappear within the next decade and only 20 Native languages will be spoken by 2050, language immersion instruction has never been more important. Endangered and extinct languages, such as Eyak in Alaska, whose last speaker died in 2008, are becoming increasingly common as older generations pass without support systems in place to help Native children learn their languages.

In many communities and schools, English-only learning has become the dominant mindset for achieving upward mobility and success in the domestic socioeconomic marketplace. This model is unacceptable. Learning through immersion creates increased cognitive skills that better prepares students for success later in life. We must break with unsuccessful educational concepts and support Native communities before linguistic and cultural traditions disappear. We all must set a goal to support education models that prepare our children for a successful life via our traditional cultures and languages. Comprehensive, full-day language immersion programs are the models that reach that goal. They increase academic achievement as well as create fluent Native speakers who can preserve their living language for future generations.

Our children and Native languages should be celebrated. As such, teaching models that support our students should be encouraged not only from within our communities but from the nation as a whole. Boosting the number of students able to speak, read, and write in more than one language—what the President and Education Secretary Arne Duncan sometimes refer to as “bi-literacy skills”—is essential to our communities’ and America’s future. Therefore, NIEA calls on tribes, Native communities, parents, educators, policy makers, and education stakeholders everywhere to support comprehensive, full-day Native language immersion programs in order to create more opportunities for our children, protect Native languages and cultures, and sustain our communities’ and America’s future.

It is time the federal government upholds its responsibility to tribes and our students. Congress should pass S. 1948 – the Native Language Immersion Student Achievement Act – and S. 2299 – a bill to reauthorize the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act. Today we start anew and reopen our cherished work to build upon our legacy and devotion to our students. A sound education, rooted in cultural and linguistic traditions, is our most lasting memorial to the past as well as our means to secure the future. Act now, so we can all build this memorial so that our young people have access to a successful future rooted in their sacred customs and languages. Act now to support language immersion learning and Native education in order to secure that future.

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*NIEA, founded in 1969, is the most inclusive Native organization in the country—representing Native students, educators, families, communities, and tribes. NIEA’s mission is to advance comprehensive educational opportunities for all American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians throughout the United States. From communities in Hawaii, to tribal reservations across the continental U.S., to villages in Alaska and urban communities in major cities, NIEA has the most reach of any Native education organization in the country.*