

April 15, 2020

Dear Members of Congress,

The National Coalition of Native American Language Schools and Programs writes to inform you of the dire effect of the Covid-19 crisis on the community-based efforts to revitalize and maintain our precious Native American languages as a resource for Native people and the United States at large. Our grassroots organization was established to support, connect, and leverage the expertise of Native American language schools and programs nationwide. The National Coalition member schools include a variety of schools that include: Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools, state public schools, charter schools, and private non-profit schools. National Coalition member schools range from preschool programs through college programs and schools. We offer assistance to communities seeking to start new programs and work collaboratively on best practices and common issues. We are concerned that the Covid-19 outbreak will erase the gains resulting from decades of work to prevent the extinction of our languages.

We urge the establishment of a Native American language education resource center to help our schools and programs survive the economic, educational and social disruptions caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. We need financial support, technical assistance and a Native American language center to develop and implement a strategy to save from danger our schools, programs and fragile efforts to keep our languages alive, spoken by American Indians, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians now and into the future.

It was only thirty years ago that Congress passed the Native American Languages Act of 1990 (NALA). That Act reversed federal policy and ended practices responsible for the endangerment and elimination of traditional languages of our people. The U.S. established a policy that recognized the right of the indigenous peoples of our country in the lower forty-eight, Alaska and Hawaii to continue ancient languages, develop them and use them in contemporary life, including education.

While NALA was a powerful U.S. policy statement and is foundational to our work, federal, state, local and indeed tribal governments have not been the key drivers in preserving, teaching and revitalizing highly endangered Native American languages. Tribes deal with a huge variety of governmental responsibilities, and daunting challenges resulting from centuries of displacement, trauma, forceful suppression of Native languages, culture and traditions; and, a myriad of economic disadvantages, and disparities in health care, housing and educational opportunity.

Moving forward the goals and aspirations established in NALA has therefore been taken up by small groups of dedicated people, typically organized informally without secure and stable governmental sources of funding. The significant progress made before the Covid-19 crisis has been through language nests for infants and preschoolers, family and student language


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immersion camps, specialized teacher training in Native American languages, and through highly underfunded Native language education K-12 and higher education programs. Ironically, our efforts focused on Native American language survival have produced educational and social outcomes that federal education policies and state and local entities have struggled unsuccessfully to address. Our small schools and programs have proven a best practice for educating native children and have demonstrated high levels of academic achievement, improved health, resistance to destructive behaviors and substance abuse, increased family and community cohesiveness. In short, Native American language schools and programs are helping our youth reach their full potential, bringing benefits to communities, states, and the nation.

The Covid-19 crisis poses a serious threat to the Native American language and culture-based resources that have been built up slowly over decades through the enduring efforts of generations of native speakers, educators, students, parents, and community members. Our schools and programs are very vulnerable. They have been left without the means to pay rent for offices and facilities, continue language documentation, maintain family and student outreach, provide distance learning, and other vital education and support services.

The National Coalition urges decisive actions by the Congress to provide emergency assistance, establish a Native American language education resource center, ensure the survival of our schools and programs, and prevent further loss of our Native languages.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Leslie Harper", with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Leslie Harper
President