

## **NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGES RESOURCE CENTER (S. 4510)**

To Protect and Stabilize Native American Language Education

**Threat of COVID:** The coronavirus pandemic has led to school closures, job losses, financial insecurity for families, the collapse of the economies in Native communities, and most tragically, a disproportionate number of Native American lives lost. Now, more than ever, Congress needs to take action to further the trust responsibilities of the U.S. and carry out the commitments to indigenous populations, such as the policies enacted under the Native American Languages Act (NALA).

Without action, years of progress to preserve and revitalize Native American languages will be lost, putting many languages on the precipice of extinction again. Operating with limited resources, Native American language immersion schools and programs desperately need coordinated, experienced support. The COVID-19 crisis threatens to destroy 30 years of progress made in vulnerable communities, progress that may not be able to be fully restored without prompt intervention.

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

- **Centuries of Suppression:** It was long federal policy to eliminate Native American languages through punishing children for using their languages. By 1990, the some 150 remaining Native American remaining languages were dying out.i
- **The Native American Languages Act (NALA):** In 1990, the Congress passed the landmark Native American Languages Act (NALA) to reverse the previous policy of eliminating indigenous languages. NALA committed the United States to work with Native Americans to preserve and revitalize Native American languages.ii
- **Native Americans Rescue Indigenous Languages:** Many indigenous languages were on the brink of extinction. There were few Native American language learning or teaching resources that often had to operate outside of public and tribal school systems. Core Native American groups took on what seemed an impossible challenge to initiate and operate Native language medium/immersion schools.iii
- **Role of Immersion Schools in Language Survival:** Experience and research has shown that the only programs succeeding in reversing Native American language extinction have been NALA-based medium/immersion schooling.
- **Data Driven Results and Distinctive Benefits:** Parallel to foreign language immersion, Native American language medium/immersion education produces strong academic outcomes and increased high school graduation and college attendance rates. These programs also create a strong identity and a commitment to contribute to Native community sustainability. iv They are also the only programs that have succeeded in reversing the extinction of Native American languages. v
- **A Call for Parity:** Congress has funded 16 Centers for Foreign Language Excellence in various universities to provide support for foreign language learning. And yet, no such center has been established for Native American languages, despite enactment of NALA, and the existence of a special legal relationship and the trust responsibility of the United States. vi

## BILL SUMMARY

**Senate Bill 4150** would create a national Native American Language Resource Center to honor the congressional obligation to tribes and indigenous communities to protect and promote Native American languages.

**The Native American Languages Resource Center** would provide support for Native American language medium/immersion programs and schools serving children of all ages and at all levels of learning, from Pre-K to PhD. The Center would also provide necessary resources and best practices to support distance learning, which is particularly critical due to the state of broadband access in Native communities. The Center would not be located on a single university campus, but as a consortium of institutions that reflect the diversity of Native American languages, cultures and communities throughout the United States.

- The Center will encourage and support the revitalization and use of Native American languages in instruction, the development of immersion programs, and support schools to include Native American languages in their curriculum with the same academic credit that is awarded to foreign language courses. The Center will also support the teacher training necessary to provide these opportunities.
- The Center will serve as a resource to federal, tribal, state, and local governments and other organizations to spread best practices to use for the development of Native American language teaching and learning and for incorporating technology in distance learning or hybrid learning settings.

## ENDORSEMENTS

The Native American Languages Resource Center has been endorsed by a number of organizations, including the National Congress of American Indians, National Indian Education Association, National Coalition of Native American Language Schools and Programs, American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, and Ka Haka ‘Ula O Ke‘elikōlani College of Hawaiian Language at the University of Hawaii at Hilo.

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i Testimony on hearing for NALA from Linguist Dr. Michael Krauss, pgs 22-26 <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED354136.pdf>

ii Text of NALA: <https://www2.nau.edu/jar/SIL/NALAct.pdf>

iii America’s Languages by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences: <https://www.amacad.org/publication/americas-languages>

iv Benefits of Native language immersion by Dr. Teresa McCarty et al.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52cf1070e4b048ae22d972b2/t/54aac6b3e4b0c309d027948a/1420478131256/McCarty+%282011%29.+Role+and+Impact+of+Native+Languages+and+Cultural+Context.pdf>

v Report by Dr. Jenine Pease-Pretty On Top <http://www.aihec.org/our-stories/docs/NativeLanguageImmersion.pdf>

vi Home for National Foreign Language Centers <https://www.nflrc.org/>