



March 5, 2018

Committee Chair

House Community and Regional Affairs Committee

Capitol Room 124

Juneau, AK 99801

Regarding: House Concurrent Resolution 19 Urging Governor Bill Walker to Issue a Linguistic Emergency for our Alaska Native Languages

Dear Co-Chair Parish and members of the Committee:

The Iñupiaq Language Commission strives to preserve and perpetuate the Iñupiaq language of Northwest Alaska. The Commission includes Iñupiaq language speakers from across Northwest Alaska who are appointed by the Regional Elders Council for their knowledge and experience in teaching and speaking the language. The Commission created the Iñupiaraaqtaa app, updated the Iñupiaq language dictionary, and hosted elders and youth conferences in region to encourage the transmittal of our culture to the next generation. Despite our efforts, we continue to see many challenges that are preventing young people from learning and speaking our language.

The Northwest Arctic Borough Census area is 84 percent Alaska Native/American Indian according to the 2010 census. Yet, according to a survey of our region from 2005, only 14 percent of the people living in Northwest Alaska speak Iñupiaq fluently. Since the survey we have lost elders and members of the community who are fluent speakers. The Iñupiaq language, like other Alaska Native languages, contains knowledge and history of our traditional lifestyle. This knowledge and history cannot simply be translated into English without losing the connection to how our people survived in the Arctic for thousands of years.

The Commission has attempted to bring more of our language into schools in Northwest Alaska without success. The barriers to doing this are significant. Local School Boards are dealing with increased mandates, reduced funding, and no incentives to provide language learning or immersion programming.

Fluent speakers that would like to teach in school, but may not have the financial means to obtain a degree, are available but underutilized.

The Commission and other Elders in our region see every day how hungry our young people are for their language. It is central to the identity of our people. It is central to the well-being of individuals, communities, elders, youth, and adults. Every year, more fluent speakers pass away and a new generation that have parents who do not know their language are raising them. Time is of the essence and we believe House Concurrent Resolution 19 urging Governor Bill Walker to issue a linguistic emergency for our Alaska Native languages will create the sense of urgency needed to address this situation if it is followed up by legislative and administrative action.

In addition to the Commission's support for House Concurrent Resolution 19, we respectfully request that the legislature adopt statutes that create a requirement for School Districts in the State to implement Alaska Native language immersion programming to address this urgent situation. This curriculum should be directed at all levels from early childhood education through high school. These statutes should allow school districts to develop language immersion locally and use local experts and traditional knowledge holders. Though School Boards may be empowered to implement programming today, the path to implementation is challenging and often puts language programming at odds with other mandates.

We know that teaching our language will perpetuate our culture and way of life. We will strengthen the next generation of Alaska Native people, and all of Alaska, by recognizing the value of our languages and acting on the urgency of this situation.

Quyanuk for your time and consideration,



Christina Ugik Westlake, President

CC:

Representative John Lincoln

Senator Donny Olson

Governor Bill Walker

Annette Evans Smith, Chair, Alaska Native Languages Preservation Advisory Council



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Respect for Elders • Knowledge of Language • Love for Children • Knowledge of Family Tree • Respect for Others • Sharing • Responsibility to Tribe
Respect for Nature • Hunter Success • Domestic Skills • Family Roles • Cooperation • Humility • Avoid Conflict • Hard Work • Humor • Spirituality