

Legislative Written Testimony to the House Community & Regional Affairs Committee  
in support of House Concurrent Resolution 19 *Urging the Governor and Other State Agencies  
to Work Actively with the Legislature and Alaska Native Organizations to Ensure the Survival and  
Continued use of all 20 of the State's Alaska Native Languages* 03/08/18 by Gail Dabaluz

---

Good afternoon to the House Community and Regional Affairs Committee. I am pleased to submit my legislative written testimony to this body in support of House Concurrent Resolution 19.

My given name is S'eenakw' and English name is Gail Dabaluz. I am a tribally enrolled citizen with Central Council Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska (CCTHITA). It is our sovereign governmental entity that administers the P.L. 93-638 Indian Self Determination and Educational Assistance Act, as amended contractual agreements on behalf of its 31,000 tribal citizens. I am a current doctoral student enrolled at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) in the Indigenous Studies Ph. D program.

I am voicing my support of HCR 19 from a deeply personal level. My family and I relocated from Juneau, AK to Hilo, HI in 1994 to attend the University of Hawai'i at Hilo (UHH), so our daughter Ke'ala could be enrolled in the Hawaiian Immersion schools. We left our jobs, house, boat and large network of family and friends to move to Hilo, to be a part of the Pūnana Leo 'O Hilo (language learning nest) Hawaiian Immersion Preschool and later, Keaukaha Hawaiian Immersion Elementary School. Our daughter was accepted into the program, after a year in Hawai'i. She is the only Alaska Native who has been admitted to the Pūnana Leo 'O Hilo and Keaukaha Hawaiian Immersion schools that I am aware of. The medium of instruction was 'olelo Hawai'i Wale No (Only Speak in Hawaiian) on all campuses and is pre-K up to the Ph. D level. Participating families had to commit to the Hawaiian epistemology, which is a branch of philosophy that investigates the origin, nature, methods and limits of human knowledge, from a Hawaiian paradigm (worldview).

While an undergraduate at UHH, I worked with the founding members of the Pūnana Leo, including: Drs. William "Pila" Wilson, Kaunoe Kamanā, Larry Kimura, and Kalena Silva. They provided me the foundational knowledge to understand how to create an immersion language program, incorporating an Indigenous worldview, which exceeded western educational standards. This first-hand knowledge as a parent of a Hawaiian Immersion student is the only one in the entire state of Alaska and probably, throughout the United States.

I later broadened my understanding of immersion schools, through my travels to Aotearoa (New Zealand) to gain direct knowledge of Te Kōhanga Reo (language

learning nest) Māori immersion schools. The Indigenous language learning model was first launched by the Maori's in Aotearoa in 1981, and later, followed by the Hawaiians in 1982.

These personal experiences with language immersion programs were applied when I returned to Juneau to work for Sealaska Heritage Foundation (SHF) as their Language and Culture Specialist to develop the At Yatx'i Satu Kei Nas.ax̱ (The Voices of our Children are Rising) Tlingit Immersion Preschool in 2000. The preschool was based upon the Head Start model and experienced challenges, since it was based upon an income criteria. Those lessons learned have led to various approaches to reversing language shift, in order to preserve our ancestral languages in a tangible way. The CCTHITA, Sealaska Heritage Institute (SHI), Goldbelt Heritage Foundation, University of Alaska (UAS) and Juneau School District (JSD) has worked collaboratively to create Indigenous language opportunities in order to save them. We have few remaining fluent speakers in the southeast region, representing the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian Nations.

The importance of learning one's ancestral languages is to understand the paradigms and deep philosophical connections to our homelands. These lessons are shared through an oral tradition of our Elders and transmitted, oftentimes, in secular ceremony. We understand the importance of looking at unique ways to share our languages and Ways of Being. Some of our tribal citizens have You Tube channels to teach the languages. Others use social media to foster comradery among geographically diverse and separate places to maintain our cultural identity through language.

I can attest to the efficacy of total immersion and using as many approaches to achieve this goal. It is my family's experience that immersion is the way to instruct our People in order to regain our Indigenous languages, as they relate to our culture.

I urge each committee member to concur with the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council's recommendation to work with Governor Walker and state agencies to issue an administrative order recognizing a linguistic emergency is occurring in the State of Alaska. All measures to reverse this are recommended. There is no threat to displace the English language through this measure; there is literally no escaping the English language in the state of Alaska.

Gunalchéesh,

*S'eenaaakw'*

Gail Dabaluz