

Alaska Native Language Revitalization

Prepared for the  
Alaska State Legislature  
HB 254 Alaska Native Language and Advisory Council

By

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In honor of my ancestors and in respect to this committee, I am privileged to tell you who I am:

Lingít x'eináx Yéideiklats'ok ka Kaahaní ax saayí.

Shangukeidí ka Cháak' naa xat sitee.

Kawdliyaayi Hit áyá xát.

Lukaax.adi yádi áyá xát.

My Tlingit names are Yéideilats'ok and Kaahaní

I am of the Thunderbird Clan and the Eagle Moiety.

I am from the House Lowered from the Sun of Klukwan.

I am a Child of the Sockeye Clan.

My Tlingit names embody my social identity and cultural values. They establish a bond between me and my ancestors, and they create a responsibility to our future generations. My social identity reflects our world view and our relationship to our land and environment.

My English name is Rosita Worl, and I serve as President of the Sealaska Heritage Institute (SHI), whose mission is to perpetuate and enhance the cultures of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshians. SHI has been engaged in language restoration efforts for the last twelve years.

I am here today to testify in support of House Bill 254, "An Act establishing the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council and relating to the

Preservation, Restoration, and Revitalization of Alaska Native languages.” I would also like to commend you in this noble effort to support the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of this State.

I will not dwell on the historical reasons and circumstances as to why Native languages are on the verge of extinction. Rather, I will focus on the positive results that the adoption of this bill and language revitalization can bring to Alaska Natives and to the State of Alaska.

First, it is important to briefly outline the status of Alaska Native languages today. Unless remedial action is initiated, most all of Alaska Native languages will join their already extinct linguistic relative, the Eyak, within a few short decades. According to a UNESCO report on endangered languages, Inupiaq in the North Slope and Kotzebue and the Gwich’in Athabaskan languages are “severely endangered,” meaning that the languages are spoken by grandparents and older generations. While the parent generations may understand Inupiaq and Gwich’in Athabaskan, they do not generally speak these languages to children or among themselves. Aleut and the Southeast Alaska Native languages are “critically endangered” meaning that the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently. Yup’ik, which is the healthiest indigenous language in Alaska, is classified as “vulnerable.” This means that most children speak the

language; but it may be restricted to certain domains such as in the home. I note with deep regret that Eyak is extinct.

In the 1990s, Alaska Natives began to advocate in earnest for the revitalization of indigenous languages. Sealaska was successful in advancing an amendment to the Native American Languages Esther Martinez Act of 1992 that provided for language revitalization programs in Alaska based on the status of our language restoration efforts at that time. I am enclosing a report prepared by the Sealaska Heritage Institute that provides an overview of the language programs administered by Alaska Native organizations today. We apologize that it may be an incomplete record, but it should provide for you the range and the limitations of the programs that are operating in the state. To my knowledge, state funding is not available for language restoration programs. The unfortunate reality is that the federal funding level has been woefully inadequate with something like \$4 million in competitive grants available annually for all tribes throughout the United States. The gains we made in federal funding through aggressive advocacy on our part have been offset by the shrinking federal appropriations in the last few years, and we are yet struggling to ensure that funding for the Alaska Native Education Equity Act continues. Thus, the state's effort to support the preservation, restoration, and revitalization of Alaska Native languages becomes even more critically imperative.

It is also important to briefly review the work of the Alaska Native Language Center in the event it might be suggested that its work may be duplicated by the proposed Alaska Native Language and Advisory Council. The ANLC was established by state legislation in 1972, and it has focused on the documentation of Alaska Native languages. While the study of Native languages is important, documentation, which has been the primary focus on the ANLC, does not by itself, lead to restoration of a language. Documentation does not include the development of curriculum or the training of teachers to provide instruction on Native languages. Native language curricula and Native language teachers are critical in language revitalization. Rather than documentation, the heart of the Council's work will be to "advise the governor and the legislature on programs, policies, and projects for cost effective preservation, restoration, and revitalization of Alaska Native languages in the state." This work together with the necessary funding can ensure that one of our most significant resources in the state survives.

Native organizations have the capacity to implement language revitalization programs as reflected by the report I am submitting to you. Native Peoples have been staunch advocates of language revitalization efforts, and I would stress that it is essential that Native organizations be eligible recipients of state funds. Michael Krauss, the foremost linguist in the state, recognized the importance of Native American organizations and tribes as applicants for funding in his testimony supporting the Native American Languages Act of

1992. He stated “you cannot from outside inculcate into people the will to revive or maintain their languages” (Hinton 2001).

I would further recommend that the legislature and administration adopt interim measures to immediately support revitalization language projects for the most critically endangered languages. However, I also want to assure you that I am of the firm opinion that the legislation to establish the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council must be adopted if we are to ensure the survival of Native languages. The Council must formulate policies that support the revitalization of Native languages and identify barriers that threaten the survival of Native language.

Significantly, one of the most immediate effects of the legislation is that it would serve to reverse the perception that the State of Alaska is adverse to linguistic diversity. It would further send a powerful message that Alaska sees indigenous languages as a part of its heritage to be protected. Unfortunately, the adoption of the English-Only legislation in 1998<sup>1</sup> was interpreted by many, and certainly by the Alaska Native population, as an effort to suppress Native languages. Although this may not have been the intent, I would hope that one

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<sup>1</sup> The legislation restricted the state from conducting business in any language other than English with limited exceptions. In 2002, a superior court ruled that the law violates free speech rights, striking the law down. In 2007, the state Supreme Court issued a 4-1 split decision, ruling that the first section of the law (requiring English to be the only language used for government functions) is unconstitutional, and the second part (requiring English for all government documents and records) is constitutional as long as duplicates can be made in other languages.

of the first recommendations that the Council advances is a proposal to the legislature and the governor that Alaska join Hawaii in declaring that the state is officially multi-lingual.

The adoption of this legislation could also send a powerful message that indigenous languages are not evil or inferior to English. Children growing up with the perception that their language and culture are inferior more often develop low self-esteem, and studies have revealed that low self-esteem is a major factor in failure at school.

Conversely, a positive self-identity is a prerequisite to academic achievement. However, the emotional benefit of a positive self-identity must be accompanied by real changes in the classroom that provide for the teaching of Native language and culture. This will require considerable work and funding.

Sealaska Heritage Institute has consistently conducted evaluations of our programs in which Native language and culture are taught in schools. The curricula we have developed and the professional development workshops we have offered to teachers are oriented towards the instruction of Native language and culture. Equally important, our objectives have been to improve the academic status of our students by advancing critical thinking, knowledge and science. Our evaluations reveal that students do better academically when they are taught Native language and culture. We are preparing a longitudinal

study of students who have participated in the demonstration project we initiated in the Juneau schools, and we will be pleased to share the report with the committee when it is complete. We are confident that the study will demonstrate the academic achievement which results from the incorporation of Native language and cultural studies into the classroom. However, we have grave concerns that the school district will not be able to sustain their minimal efforts they have provided in teaching Native languages.

I believe that the legislature understands the social and economic costs to a society and to the state when a significant percent of the population has a poor education. It is my hope that our society will come to accept and understand that the incorporation of Native language and culture into our schools leads to improved academic success that ultimately benefits the individual students as well as our state and society.

Native languages contain intellectual wealth accumulated through thousands upon thousands of years. They have conveyed how Native people see and use the land. The difference in world views among different Alaska Native cultural groups was readily apparent to me when I was conducting field work in the North Slope studying whale hunting. I absolutely could not see the grey patches on the horizon that my companion hunters saw that signified open water. Neither did I know the over eighty terms they had in their language to distinguish the different types of ice (Nelson 1969). Knowledge of ice is critical

to the survival of the hunters who harvest whale, marine mammals and fowl on the sea ice. The 3,300 Tlingit place names that Sealaska Heritage will be publishing in a cultural geographic atlas provide knowledge about our environment and land in Southeast Alaska. Interestingly, these names may also provide information about climate change through thousands of years. Language is a uniquely a human gift central to our experience of being human and Alaska Natives. This knowledge and the differing world views are worthy of protection and transmittal to future generations. Linguistic and cultural diversity is a benefit to society.

Unfortunately Native languages are on the road to extinction unless we initiate immediate efforts to rectify this trend. I urge that the legislature act immediately to adopt HB 254, “An Act establishing the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council and relating to the Preservation, Restoration, and Revitalization of Alaska Native languages.”

I would like to dedicate my testimony to the late Dr. Bill Demmert of Klawock, who served as a Professor of Education at the University of Alaska Southeast. He was the first and only Native to serve as Commissioner of the State of Alaska Department of Education. He was an educator with national prominence and was instrumental in the passage of the Indian Education Act. He was also a staunch advocate of Native language restoration and studied how Native language contributes to academic success. We were fortunate to

have him serve on the Board of Trustees of the Sealaska Heritage Institute. I would also like to respectfully recommend that the state legislature consider incorporating his name into the title of HB 254 “The Bill Demmert Act establishing the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council.” It would be a tribute to all who have worked tirelessly to revitalize Alaska Native languages.

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## References

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**Sealaska Heritage Institute**  
**Alaska Native Language Programs**

**January 2012**

Alaska Natives are comprised of seven linguistic groups including the Inupiat, Yup'ik, Aleut, Athabascan, Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian. Each has or had its own indigenous language. But today, no group is producing new speakers with Native as their first language. Many have language revitalization efforts in which students learn many nouns, some verbs, some greetings and introductions. None are producing fluent or even proficient speakers. Most programs are for beginners and a few are for intermediate learners. Very few programs are for advanced learners. Many communities have singing and dancing groups where individuals learn songs in their Native language and may or may not know the meaning of the words they are singing. At this time, many young Native individuals have expressed great interest in learning their language. Native language acquisition formerly occurred in the homes. Because of many factors, parents today do not know their Native language and are unable to teach the language to their children. The challenge of teaching Native languages has largely been left to schools and community organizations. This paper provides a brief summary of programs offered around the state. Not all regions responded to the request from Sealaska Heritage Institute (SHI) for information about their language programs. We received responses from seven regions. The Arctic Slope and Aleutian Pribiloff provided SHI the most detailed information. Other language revitalization programs may exist in Alaska of which we are not aware.

From Barrow to Metlakatla, community organizations and school districts are offering language programs. In the Arctic Slope, the schools teach the four dialects of Iñupiaq throughout the 12 schools in the district. The Iñupiaq Education program has created VIVA (Visual Iñupiaq Vocabulary Acquisition) online language units. Each unit contains its own assessment and scoring—students' keep track of their own progress. Once a unit is completed, the students practice their verbal pronunciation with a fluent speaker—the district employs fourteen fluent Iñupiaq speakers. This program is noteworthy for several reasons: sequential units based on the Greymorning method, scoring contained within each unit; emphasis on hearing the language tied with images rather than words and pronunciation work with fluent speakers. Classes are held 3-5 times per week in the elementary school and are available as electives

in the middle and high schools. Production of the VIVA units requires a full-time curriculum developer. The units are recorded in four Iñupiaq dialects. The North Slope Borough School District (NSBSD) is also working with cultural units and developing a math program based on the traditional Iñupiaq number system.

Nome is adapting its language program based on the NSBSD materials. They are receiving training from the curriculum developer on how to create their own programs using 'flash'. This region has a web-based vocabulary development game. They are recording fluent speakers of the different Iñupiaq dialects. Their record demonstrates the benefits of sharing resources, materials and staff knowledge to maximize the language revitalization efforts in our state.

In the northwest Arctic, 14% of residents are fluent in Iñupiaq. Of these speakers, 92% are over the age of 65.<sup>2</sup> Despite the disheartening statistics, communities are taking action to ensure the language survives. NANA Regional Corporation entered into a unique partnership with Rosetta Stone to produce an interactive computer learning program as part of the Rosetta Stone Endangered Language Program. Software for the two predominant dialects in the region was made available to the head of household for each family of shareholders and is available for sale. An additional effort to perpetuate the language in the region is the immersion school in Kotzebue, Nikaitchuat Ilisagviat. For 13 years, approximately 20 students age 3 through first grade have been learning all subjects solely in Iñupiatun. The Nikaitchuat staff hope to someday offer more grades at the school. The University of Alaska Fairbanks Chukchi Campus based in Kotzebue, offers an Iñupiaq A.A.S. degree and certificate program. Classes are available online so students in the villages are able to participate. Finally, the Aqqaluk Trust is a non-profit organization with the mission: "Empowering the Iñupiat people through language, culture and education." The Aqqaluk Trust coordinates the regional Iñupiaq Language Commission and conducts Camp Sivunniigvik each summer, at which children from across the region spend one week sessions on the banks of the Kobuk River enveloped in Iñupiaq traditions, values and the Iñupiaq language.

Bethel has operated an immersion school for more than 17 years. They have produced many materials including Big Books in their Yup'ik language.

Other regions are also making use of technology. The Kodiak area has produced an online audio dictionary and electronic Aluutiq flashcards. They

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<sup>2</sup> Survey of Residents of the Northwest Arctic Borough conducted by the Aqqaluk Trust and the Native Village of Kotzebue in 2005.

also have a Stories and Lost Words project and are in a consortium with Port Lions and the Aluuttig Museum. Today there are only 45 fluent speakers of the Alutiiq language, the traditional language of the Native people of the Kodiak Archipelago, only 11 of which can speak the Northern Dialect, the traditional language of the *Ag'uanermiut* (people of Afognak). All the speakers are Elders. Alutiiq, like so many Alaska Native languages, struggles for survival. Afognak Native Corporation has funded a language program operated by the Native Village of Afognak and Native Village of Port Lions to create innovative language learning tools. See Alutiiq Language Website: <http://www.ktuu.com/features/assignmentak/learning-alutiiqonline-20120112,0,5807593.story> and Alutiiq iPhone Application: <http://www.ktuu.com/videobeta/80965544-341f-44e4-8e14-5210bac33c9b/News/Afognak-Alutiiq-Connect-iPhone-app-intro>. Through the joint efforts of the Alaska Native Corporations and Tribes in the Kodiak Archipelago and the Alutiiq Museum, language restoration efforts are underway.

The Chugach Region has produced many posters, videos and books. They also teach Aluuttig at Spirit Camp each summer.

The Aleutian Pribilof Islands region is the only one of the seven regions who reported that Native language still spoken in the home although we suspect this is also the case in Yup'ik villages. The village of Atka reports that Unangam Tunuu (Aleut) is still spoken in one-fourth of the homes. They report that there are 124 fluent speakers still living representing 3.5% of the enrolled tribal members. Two of the 12 schools in the region offer language and culture classes in the curriculum. Ten schools offer limited exposure to language and culture. In Atka, where ¼ of the homes still speak Unangam Tunuu (Aleut), a fluent speaker teaches language classes one hour/day. In St. Paul, a certified teacher is also a fluent Unangam Tunuu speaker. She teaches one language class, five days per week. There is an active singing and drumming group. Youth and elders collaborate to write lyrics for new songs. At community gatherings elders speak Unangam Tunuu. Three culture camps are held during the summer months. The region is seeking \$1,000,000 to create a Rosetta Stone product for Unangam Tunuu. The corporation board of directors has committed themselves to one hour of language lessons during each of the three annual meetings.

Southeast Alaska has many and varied programs. Throughout the region, “language learners,” who are teachers and who are yet learning their Native

language, teach with few exceptions all language classes in some cases in collaboration with fluent speakers. Yakutat has federal funding to write children's stories in Tlingit and develop learning materials for the stories. Local students and artists illustrate the stories. The core language staff work with fluent speakers on a weekly basis. Classes are taught outside the school system. Klukwan classes are taught in the school while in Haines, language classes are taught in the local museum. In Juneau, the Goldbelt Heritage Foundation is developing curriculum and working with teachers and fluent speakers to develop lessons using the Tlingit Verb Index. The region-wide entity, Sealaska Heritage Institute, produces curriculum and provides teacher training on a region-wide basis. SHI is concentrating on the Developmental Language Process (DLP) and has produced curriculum materials for academic content areas (math, science, social studies and literature), as well as Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian DLP units. SHI has also published Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian dictionaries and has highly popular interactive language programs on its website. SHI sponsors summer basketball camps in which Native language instruction is integrated into basketball training. Both Goldbelt Heritage and SHI sponsor summer camps for youth. The camps feature language classes but are not conducted in the language. Other communities in Southeast have Tlingit language classes in the schools (Hoonah, Sitka and Kake). Wrangell and Ketchikan have programs after school.

In addition to offering classes, Ketchikan Indian Community has devoted time and grant money to improve advanced learner skills. One Haida, Tsimshian and Tlingit advanced learner is teamed with fluent speakers. They spend a significant amount of their week with the fluent speakers. The goal is to increase the learners' skills to proficiency. This is the only program in the state with that stated goal although others may be doing the same work.

University of Alaska Southeast has offered Tlingit classes at beginners and intermediate levels, as well as studies of oral literature and narratives. UAS also offers mentor-apprentice classes. The University of Alaska Anchorage and Fairbanks also offer Native language classes.

In summary, a significant effort is being expended in the state to revitalize Native languages. The programs focus on using technology to teach vocabulary. Most regions are recording fluent speakers. Some regions are sharing resources and adapting materials for their own dialects. None of the regions reported stability in their Native language. Fluent speakers are passing on with no new speakers replacing them. Hundreds of learners of all ages are

learning nouns, verbs, greetings and introductions. Few progress to proficiency.

The major expressed needs are:

- Programs to support teacher language learners to work with fluent speakers to increase their own language proficiency. Mentor apprentice programs appear to be very effective.
- Programs to recruit more language learners into the teaching of the language.
- Stable funding for these programs so that teacher/learners know they can count on their program continuing.
- Curriculum development at all levels and ongoing, teacher training workshops.