

Testimony of Jasmine D. James
IN SUPPORT OF HB 216, OFFICIAL LANGAUGES OF THE STATE
Before the House State Affairs Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 216 “Official Languages of the State.” The adoption of this legislation sends a powerful message that Alaska Native languages are valued and equal to English in the State of Alaska.

As a member of a generation of Tlingit removed from the intergenerational trauma that plagued my grandparents and bled onto my father. Whose mother, like so many others, refused to teach her children her Native tongue in an effort to spare them the pain she endured. As a result of this protective act my father’s generation never learned their parent’s language and my generation grew up without the opportunity to even hear our language spoken in our homes.

I understand why our languages are in the state that they are. I am encouraged by the shifting attitudes in our State of Alaska towards its first languages. I feel the urgency and responsibility to revive and nurture the Native languages we still possess. It is my generation’s calling to breathe life into our dying languages until our language is no longer a kindling spark, but a thriving flame. A torch for my generation and generations to come to proudly carry; lighting the way to into a brighter, stronger future with the strength of our ancestors on our tongues.

I am thirsty for the rich knowledge of my ancestors held in their language and I am desperately for the opportunity for my children to learn their heritage language and culture. HB 216 gives me hope for the possibility of seeing the integration and celebration of Native languages in our education systems. Research shows that Native languages have the capacity to improve academic performance, contribute to the positive self-identity and the emotional wellbeing of Native youth. The use of and teaching of Native languages also promotes cultural diversity within schools and communities, and sustains the preservation of Native language and cultural.

There is a growing body of research demonstrating the cognitive and educational benefits of bilingualism. Sealaska Heritage Institute evaluations, as well as other studies, reveal that students’ academic performance increases when they are taught Native language and culture. Educational institutions that integrate Native languages and culture or use primarily Native languages to deliver education have Native higher graduation rates and college attendance rates.

Through Native languages each Native child’s emotional well-being and positive self-identity is lifted up and supported. Positive self-identity is essential to academic achievement. Native languages tie our peoples to their personal and cultural identity. When you remove a people from their language, you cut out the very heart of their identity. The State of Alaska’s dismal suicide rates, domestic and substance abuse

statistics is evidence of that loss of personal and cultural identity. For as Dr. Walter Sobeloff stated, "When people know who they are, they don't kill themselves."

The use and preservation of Native languages is critical to the survival of our cultures. Native Languages and Culture are intricately woven together. Language is the way a culture and its collective intellectual property is carried from one generation to the next. Native languages not only hold rich personal, social, and cultural identity, but historical, scientific and environmental expertise. With the loss of language there is an irreplaceable deletion of the indigenous world view and the knowledge systems of that people's heritage. This is a loss not only for Native peoples, but for all people.

I strongly urge the committee to support HB 216 and validate the use of Alaska Native languages in our State institutions.

Sincerely,

Jasmine D. James