

The hearing for HCR 19

in House Community and Regional Affairs

March 6th at 8am.

Honorable legislators,

Paglagivsi!

My name is Ronald Hopson Brower Sr. I am in support of HCR 19.

As we speak of Alaska Native languages, and in support of HCR 19. I am reminded of a time, of a fellow Inuk, The Honorable Mary Simon, who served her people as the National President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami. She had such an impact on me when she spoke in Tromso Norway in 2008. I quote: "We who are of the circumpolar world are facing many challenging issues relating to our environment our economies and the social conditions in our communities. But I do not think there is an issue that speaks more to who we are and how we are doing than the state of our indigenous languages." I think there are many here, and in the villages, who feel the same way about the health of Alaska Native Languages but feel helpless in their desire to know their own cultural language and be able to speak it.

In 2010, I was invited to speak at Sivutmuutilugu Uqapaitiqput. It is a vision to stabilize, even revitalize the health of our Iñupiaq language with a further goal that it will empower our communities to excel in our Inupiat heritage and culture through the use of Iñupiaq as our first language. And we have over the years had many meetings and conferences to seek ways to preserve, and perpetuate the Iñupiaq language so it remains our first language and not a heritage language. Even though we have set goals with good intentions, to enhance uqapiaqniq, speaking our language, the resulting experiences show we are moving in the opposite direction. Iñupiaq as a first language is declining. Today in many villages Inuit under the age of 50 are not able to converse in Iñupiaq at all. I am sure Inuit are not the only ones who feel this way

I did some research In regard to the Northwest Arctic Borough from 2010 Census statistics. Records showed: There was a population of about 7,300 residents. About 83% are Iñupiaq people. That would be around 6,060 Inuit, who should be speakers of the Iñupiaq language. Out of that number, about 55% or 3,332 are children under the age of 18. That leaves us with 2728 adults of whom about 40% speak Iñupiaq at home. This suggests that out of 6060 Iñupiaq in the Northwest Arctic Borough there are now about 1090 , or less, fluent Iñupiaq first language speakers.

The North Slope Census statistics recorded the same trend with about 13% fluent speakers remaining. and other Inuit regions in Canada are also going through a similar trend.

As we experience language shift to English today, our traditional first language is rapidly becoming a heritage language. Today, we need assistance to see what need to be done to reverse this situation for many Alaska Native languages. HRC 19 Would help us to consider ways to reverse this trend.

In 2008 the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues published an 'Expert Paper' on "Indigenous Children's Education and Languages". The main conclusion of the UN Expert Panel after examining all the research was this (and I quote): "the greatest predictor of long-term success in school for indigenous children is how long they receive instruction through their first language. The length of time students receive education in their mother tongue is more important than any other factor (including socio-economic status) in predicting the educational success of bilingual students. The worst results are with students in programs where the student's mother tongues are not supported at all or where they are only taught as subjects". The UN Expert Panel is making it clear to us that unless our

children grow up speaking a first language first then adding English later is very important to the educational success of children as bilingual Alaska Native students. We should implement that advice.

Not so long ago. A hunter decorated his equipment made from ivory, bone and wood with the animals he would hunt and was filled with ritual to ensure that the spirits of the animals were not offended but enchanted to willingly give themselves to the hunter. The engravings embodied in the art forms are one of the most unique in the world and is comparable to the art of other societies thriving around the same time, the Maya, the Egyptians, and of course those high cultures that developed agricultural societies. While these cultures developed writing systems, Inuit developed an oral tradition to pass on historical knowledge which was incorporated into the engravings but in language that could be spoken. It should be noted that in the magical character of artistic carvings, many sculptural and graphic compositions appear as encrypted illustrations of myths. Therefore, the markings on these tools have greater significance than just a design. They carry engraved information that allowed the storyteller to remember the messages to be repeated like coded text for generations until the hunting tool completed its service to the community. In this way traditional knowledge could be used to pass on Iñupiaq cultural history as a part of “a unique ethno-cultural language tradition”. The role of the Iñupiaq language was significant because it helped people in communities pass darkest days of winter through story telling gatherings. The oratorical skills of story tellers which we hear on radio today are preserved accounts of such historical events. They reveal ancient cultural encounters and connect events of a time past to the modern age. From the mythical tinjmiapqak (Giant eagle) to tinjutiqqak (jet plane).

Just as our art forms have changed to meet the changing conditions of the time, our Iñupiaq language has also evolved to meet the challenges we as Inuit face life in modern and western society. However, in our case, the application for support of our government, through HCR 19 to support the full perpetuation of our Alaska Native languages opens the way to hope for positive change.

As the statistics show, we have come to a time where we strongly want to revitalize our Iñupiaq and Alaska Native languages. Community People who know the language must be included as resources in any implementation program that will look at the health of our Alaska Native languages as a measure of our well-being. I support the legislation to take the first step to go beyond good intentions at home to move our language from a heritage language back to a first language. If mother speaks Iñupiaq to her child during its newborn years then it becomes the child’s first language. This can become a reality with your support. If father tells Iñupiaq stories to the child, the health of our Iñupiaq language will be reinforced and allow our children to excel in school. Yes, with your help. I would encourage a vision where children of school age are praised for speaking their Alaska Native Language in school and on school grounds. We must help a new generation of school administrators and teachers who are willing to implement a bold vision of bilingualism for our schools with Alaska languages as the first language.

This is a huge challenge and it will take the whole community to make the vision of moving the Alaska Native languages from a heritage language back to a first language. I believe it is our responsibility to honor our parents and elders of Alaska leaders to lead a new era in Alaska Native language revitalization expressed in HCR 19.

Tavra,

Ronald H, Brower Sr.

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