

For the Attention of
Governor Bill Walker of Alaska,

Greetings. I am a minister from a small church in Ketchikan Alaska where I am also a student of Haida language in pursuit of a B.A. in Alaskan Native Studies and Languages. Rarely have I seen people more determined to learn and preserve their mother tongue than the Haida people I am privileged to study with. It is difficult to put into words, ironically, the importance of preserving every threatened language we can. When we lose languages, we lose whole ways of viewing the world and perspectives on our shared human experience that cannot be recovered. I am not of Alaskan Native heritage, but when I am learning Haida I practice it with my 5-year-old son because he will need to understand the cultural history of the Alaska that will be his homeland. The preservation of Alaskan Native language is essential to the scholastic integrity of the State and thus is to the benefit of our populations as a whole; as a result, it is necessary for all of us to preserve Native Languages, and is not the responsibility of ethnic minorities alone.

There are 20 officially recognized Alaska Native Languages in the State the loss of which would adversely affect the spiritual, social, and regional well-being of Natives and Non-natives whose experience and identities are informed and inspired by the great history and tenacity of the peoples who have lived and thrived in this land before us. We do not only seek to preserve the language of an ethnic minority, but to save the cultural heritage of the land we inhabit.

As you may know, there has been a historic effort in the State of Alaska to strip cultural traditions, spirituality, and language from the indigenous peoples of the state by the enforcement of English only education. This policy has been the result of linguistic Darwinism that seeks to undermine and erase the importance and cultural significance of Alaskan Native language through the acculturative efforts of Sheldon Jackson, the damage he caused, and the precedents he set. It is imperative that we alleviate some of that damage. You have the power to rectify some of the mistakes made by the U.S. government, and the authority to uphold the American value of equality that empowers all Americans with self-determination. Our self-determination must include certain liberties such as freedom of religion, and by extension, certainly, the freedom to speak our own languages and to teach them to our children.

1) When, where, and by whom was the first bilingual school in Alaska opened?

Answer: 1824, in Unalaska, by Fr. John Veniaminov. The languages of instruction were Russian and Aleut.

2) When, where, and by whom was the last Aleut bilingual school closed?

Answer: About 1912, St. Paul Island, by the U.S. Government.

3) How many of you knew this?

4) Why not?

(p.2, Dauenhauer 1980)

Our state is in critical danger of losing its native languages, and as per Senate Bill No. 130 it is the responsibility of the state to reasonably respond to the advisement of the Alaskan Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council. By recognizing and validating the threats to these languages and the needs of our communities we prioritize their struggles in a way that has not yet been achieved in State history.

12 **WHEREAS** Senate Bill No. 130, enacted as ch. 48, SLA 2012, signed into law by
13 Governor Sean Parnell, established the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory
14 Council to advise both the governor and legislature on programs, policies, and projects to
15 provide for the cost-effective preservation, restoration, and revitalization of Alaska Native
16 languages in the state; and

(Page 1 Line 12, House Concurrent Resolution No. 19)

Studies suggest that language immersion increases proficiency in both English and the immersive language studied. These studies and their resulting data is applicable to Alaskan Natives and Non-natives alike, who attend public schools.

Alaskan Natives have an inalienable right to educate their children in a culturally-appropriate way, in the languages of their ancestors. It would be inconceivable to an American English speaker to be required to send their child to a school that teaches only in a language foreign to the language spoken in the home. Why, therefore, do we impose this requirement on Alaskan Natives, when language immersion would be beneficial to all students regardless of age, race, class, or creed?

7 **WHEREAS** 50 years of research shows that early, total language immersion
8 education for English speakers increases academic proficiency in both English and the
9 immersion language, as well as in other academic subjects; and

10 **WHEREAS** indigenous peoples should be able to provide education in the peoples'
11 own languages in a manner that is appropriate to the peoples' cultural methods of teaching and
12 learning;

(Page 2 Line 7, House Concurrent Resolution No. 19)

It naturally follows from our understanding of the benefits of language immersion and the way literacy has been stripped from Alaskan students through the closure of bilingual schools that the solution to recovering Alaskan Native languages is to reinstate bilingual schooling in the State of Alaska.

If you would truly seek to prioritize the survival of Alaskan Native Languages as per the request of the Alaskan Native Language and Advisory Council then I request that you create a requirement or option to include bilingual and language immersive study of regionally specific Alaskan Native languages in all elementary, middle, and high schools in the state with direct emphasis on early childhood education.

What follows is a description of the result of English-only education in Alaska by an English teacher, and the effects of English-only education on students' literacy and mental health. The assumption that language immersion impairs literacy in English is wrong. It does not hold up to statistical study.

We have the ability to improve literacy in English by encouraging literacy in Alaskan Native Language.

The kind of pressure described above was put on all Alaska Native languages and peoples, with devastating results. The legacy has been one of linguistic insecurity. Generations of teachers have convinced parents that Native languages will result in stupidity and difficulty in learning English. Unfortunately, the battle still rages; we are fighting the same issues we fought 100 years ago. We have the results of English-only education in Alaska, and frankly I don't think the results are much to write home about. Irreparable damage has been done to the mental health of the Native community and individual. As a teacher, I have to deal with the impact of this every day, and it makes me angry.

(p.27, Dauenhauer 1980)

Not only do you have the opportunity to set right a historic injustice, but you have a duty to the educational integrity of all Alaskan children who are expected to compete internationally with people from foreign countries who absolutely benefit from years of multilingual education. We have a responsibility to train children in their own languages and to teach children to respect and appreciate the cultural significance of the languages of other cultures if we expect them to hold their own in an interdependent international society.

If we value any of the State's official languages, English or Alaskan Native, then we must not repeat the mistakes of our forebears.

operate in a very intricate language community. It is our responsibility to understand our own language and its interaction with other languages in the community. Unless we begin to do this, we will only recycle the frustrations of the last hundred years. Unless we really understand our language and how we use it in the cultural context, we will never really be teaching English--we will only be teaching a lot of prejudice about English, which is what I think we've been doing for a couple of hundred years.

(p.29, Dauenhauer 1980)

Governor Walker, you have the chance to set the tone for what education should be, and could be, to put your name down in history as a leader who worked to preserve justice and promote equality, and to protect the history of the State you govern.

I humbly urge you to declare a state of Linguistic emergency as outlined in House Concurrent Resolution No. 19 by Representatives Ortiz, Kreiss-Tomkins, Parish, Edgmon, Foster, Kopp, Lincoln, and Chenault. I further urge you to advocate to the best of your ability for language immersion in Alaska schools.

Sincerely, and urgently,

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