



# National Alliance to Save Native Languages

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## TESTIMONY

**BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE  
OVERSIGHT HEARING ON  
THE PRESIDENT'S FY 2008 BUDGET REQUEST  
FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
AND HUMAN SERVICES ADMINISTRATION FOR  
NATIVE AMERICANS**

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### Statement of

**Ryan Wilson (Oglala Lakota)  
President  
National Alliance to Save Native Languages**

**February 15<sup>th</sup> 2007**

**STATEMENT OF**  
**THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO SAVE NATIVE LANGUAGES**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee: I am Ryan Wilson, an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe and President of the National Alliance to Save Native Languages (NASNL). On behalf of the Alliance, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on the importance of the President's FY 2008 budget and how it affects Native students. Specifically, I would like to address the importance of heritage language, culture and its vital role in the education of Native learners.

**About the National Alliance.** The National Alliance to Save Native Languages was founded in October of 2006 for the exclusive purpose of promoting the revitalization of Native languages. Creation of the Alliance was precipitated by broad-based concern in Indian Country that the rapid decline in Native language acquisition by Native youth was hurting our youth academically, culturally, socially, and physically.

The National Alliance to Save Native Languages is a coalition of stakeholders who share a desire to see the revitalization of Native Languages. The Alliance is comprised of tribes, schools, individuals, regional and national organizations. It is the only National Indian organization dedicated solely to the recovery of Native languages.

The Alliance seeks to work with tribal communities, state and federal governments to promote Native language immersion opportunities and remove barriers that may prevent those opportunities. In working with tribal communities we have discovered that approximately 95% of our youth today do not speak their heritage language.

Native scholars and linguist have documented that only 20 languages of the nearly 300 originally spoken in America are still being used by Native youth today. We are in the 59<sup>th</sup> minute of the last hour when it comes to saving these American treasures (Native Languages). Not only are these languages sacred and vital to Indian country but they are as well part of the sacred heritage of America and vital to our rich history. The Alliance believes this trend can be reversed through long term engagement and investment. Specifically a reinvigorated investment through the recently passed Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006.

**Request for Increased Federal Funding of Native Language Immersion Programs.**

The Alliance requests a \$10 million increase for FY 2008 to the Administration for Native Americans to support Native Language Immersion and other revitalization programs. This will increase the ANA budget to \$54 million, and would increase Native language programs from \$4 million to \$14 million. More significantly it would elevate the investment in language immersion programs, which only received \$500,000 in FY 2006 out of the \$44 million ANA budget.

This increase of \$10 million would support programs authorized under the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act. These programs include the following:

- **Language Nest Grants.** Native American Language nests are site based educational programs that provide instruction and child care through the use of a Native language for at least ten children under the age of seven for at least an average of 500 hours. A unique attribute to Language nest is that they provide instruction for parents, and grandparents of the the enrolled children. This is designed to increase the use of the heritage language in the home.
- **Language Survival Schools Grants.** Native American Language Survival Schools are site based educational programs for school-age students that provide an average of at least 500 hours of instruction through one or more Native American languages for at least 15 students who attend the school as their principle place of instruction. The survival school must work toward a goal of all students achieving fluency in a Native American Language as well as academic proficiency in core academic areas including math, reading, science, and writing.
- **Language Restoration Grants.** Native American Language Restoration Programs are educational programs that: provide training programs for teachers of Native languages, develop materials and publications for curriculum, work toward a goal of increasing fluency in at least one Native American language, develop master and apprentice programs, operate at least one Native American language program, provide instruction in at least one Native American Language.

President Bush signed into law the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act on December 14, 2006. Funding the Act is of the highest priority for the National Alliance to Save Native Languages.

The Alliance to Save Native Languages acknowledges the tight budget conditions and challenges in funding domestic programs. We feel the request for \$10 million is justifiable and if funded will make an immediate and significant impact. The Alliance supports the Presidents continued funding of ANA and thanks the President for recognizing the worth of ANA.

**Administration for Native Americans, HHS.** The Administration for Native Americans was established in 1974 through the Native Americans Programs Act. Its roots go back to the war on poverty programs of the Johnson administration when it was formally housed in the Office of Economic Opportunity. The Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act amended the Native American Programs Act to authorize these new grant programs. This is a continuation of the evolution of ANA and the amazing contribution it has made to Indian country.

**Level Funding of ANA for Five Years has effectively reduced the value of ANA funding by 12% even while the crisis in saving Native languages has deepened.** The Alliance would like to draw the Committee's attention to the fact that ANA has been level funded for five consecutive years at \$44 million. When inflation is factored in, in constant dollars, the purchase power of the 44 million is reduced to \$38.89 million. Moreover, the President in FY 2006 carved out \$1.8 million from the ANA budget for the his Healthy Marriage Initiative, reducing the funding available for the pre-existing ANA programs including language.

Exacerbating the budget challenge 562 federally recognized tribes compete for ANA funds, along with Native people's from Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa, Mariana Islands, Non federally recognized tribes, Native organizations and Native Hawaiian Non profit organizations.

Only 23% of applicants receive funding. With an average grant amount of \$168,000. ANA administers 220 projects annually. Of this figure 13 went to language programs. Tribal communities have demonstrated that they can leverage and create profound contributions and impact with these resources and that they are some of the best spent on Indian country of all the federal agencies.

For communities who receive these precious dollars it often means that their languages will survive. For those tribal communities who's languages are on the brink of extinction they are forced into fierce competition for these resources. In some cases getting funded or not dictates whether a language will be recorded or not before the last fluent speaker dies.

Language revitalization efforts are consistent as well with President Bush's Executive Order on American Indian and Alaska Native Education ( April 2004). In that order, the President directed Federal agencies to support the education of American Indian and Alaska Native students in a manner that is consistent with tribal traditions, languages, and cultures.

**The Extraordinary Benefits of Native Language Competency.** A growing body of research demonstrates why Native language schools are so important. First, Native American students have historically failed to respond as a whole to western learning styles. The failure has gone on at BIA, Tribal, Public, Charter, and Mission schools and is closely correlated to the effort to fully supplant Native ways of thinking with an alien intellectual structure .

Second, Native students who attend Immersion/ Heritage language schools (actually, all students not just Native) do remarkably better than their counterparts in standard, English-only schools. In Indian country this is exemplified by the students who attend the following schools:

- **Piegan Institute, Browning Montana**
- **Akwesasne Freedom school, St. Lawrence River**

- **Tse hootsooi Dine Bi olta , Ft. Defiance Arizona**
- **Lower Kuskokwin School, Bethel Alaska**
- **Cherokee Immersion, Tahlequah Oklahoma**
- **Aha Punanaleo, Hawaii**

Native students at these schools have demonstrated an extraordinary ability to out perform academically their peers at mainstream schools. Not only on standardized test are they out performing their peers, they are matriculating at Division I and Ivy league/ private colleges than their mainstream counterparts. A tragic statistic in Indian education is that for every 100 Native students who enter kindergarten only 5-10 will enroll in college. The immersion schools are reversing this sad fact.

Beyond the academic benefits of these schools the Alliance is witnessing broad-based disparities between the physical, social, mental and spiritual health of Native learners who attend heritage language schools and their counterparts who attend other schools. The Western Regional Laboratory, and the One Sky Center have advanced research and testimony that correlates bi-cultural competence and a strong sense of cultural identity with elevated protective factors. Those Native youth who have the highest levels of risk factors are Native youth who lack a sense of their cultural identity and have an inability to transfer their comfort zone into any kind of mainstream setting.

The suicide epidemic, and epidemic in meth use, violence, and other substance abuse in Indian country has not reached Immersion / heritage language schools even though it surrounds the schools themselves. Site-based management at these schools also reports a low level of office referrals, low level of truancy, and low level of classroom or playground discipline problems.

Investment in these schools and the creation of new Immersion / Heritage language schools is one of the best investments that the United States Congress could make in Indian country. While the request of the Alliance for a \$10 million increase would only represent 1% of the Federal government's Indian Education budget, it will prove itself and investment well made and will increasingly become one of the core strategies in turning around the performance of Indian students.

### **Closing**

The National Alliance to Save Native Languages commends Congress for acknowledging America's historical and moral responsibility in revitalizing Native languages. The Alliance thanks the Indian Affairs Committee for its steadfast efforts on behalf of Indian country and for upholding the sacred trust relationship between Indian country and the United States. Where once the United States was the primary investor in the destruction of Native languages it now has an opportunity to invest in the revitalization of these American treasures. The Alliance believes that through partnership and collaboration we can give Native children the world class education they need and deserve. The Alliance stands ready to assist the Committee in any way possible in carrying forward this historic endeavor.