

TESTIMONY OF RYAN WILSON (OGLALA LAKOTA)  
PRESIDENT NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO SAVE NATIVE LANGUAGES  
BEFORE THE  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE  
ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES  
FY 2025 Budget  
May 8<sup>th</sup> 2024

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**Request:** We request (20 million) for Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Living Languages Grant Program at the Office of Indian Economic Development at Department of Interior. Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) Native American Language Immersion (**5million**).

**Introduction.** Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, Members of the Committee. My name is Ryan Wilson (Tatanka Wasaka'), President of the National Alliance to Save Native Languages. I am honored to be here to testify today before the Subcommittee to provide the views of the Alliance on the importance and benefits of Native language immersion programs in the Bureau of Indian Education (BIA) system and the BIA Living Languages Grant Program.

***Proposed Continued Funding for BIA Living Languages Grant Program (LLGP).***

The National Alliance to Save Native Languages request **20 million** for the LLGP program at the Office of Indian Economic Development DOI. In FY 2020 DOI awarded 15 million in grants to 45 Tribes and tribal organizations under the LLGP initiative in grants ranging from \$59,000-\$200,000. 59 Tribes applied out of the 574 federally recognized tribes in FY 2023. The Alliance views this initial funding as a positive and necessary step in creating a foundation for consistent investment in LLGP and we thank this Subcommittee for their bipartisan support in establishing this new investment.

The Alliance views the initial approach and program design as loadable but too broad, lacking clearly defined outcomes and verification of language community capacity. The Alliance proposes a tiered grant program that would provide entry level tribes competing for planning, development, implementation, and documentation of their own funding stream at 2.5 million. This is in recognition that all tribes are in different language environments with different capacity to engage in impactful revitalization strategies.

Tribes competing and winning these entry tiered grants should be given an opportunity upon successful completion to engage in heightened grants with greater capacity requirements. The Alliance is recommending that tribes with language capacity to legitimately engage in the goals of LLGP language revitalization compete in a separate tier for awards up to \$350,000. We request 17.5 million for this proposed tier.

To deepen the impact, build community language infrastructure, assist tribal communities in committing to longitudinal goals of revitalization the awards need to be larger and focused on less tribes. Language revitalization investments from the federal government should not be focused on tribal parity or equality of opportunity in funding but based on capacity of language tribes. Limited resources require focused investments to save language stock.

The Alliance wishes to recommend that tribes who have lost their remaining speakers or recovering languages from recordings, dictionaries and archives be allowed to form a consortium of language family tribes and compete for the proposed higher tiered grants of \$350,000. Several of the awardees while different Tribes share dialects of the same language. None of the current language funding programs in HHS and DoE have invested in regional restoration plans for tribes with the same languages. While this approach may seem nuanced it is exactly the creativity needed to potentially bring back living speakers to tribal communities who have long been without any.

***Request for continued funding Bureau of Indian Education Native American Language Immersion 5 million.***

The Alliance is requesting that the Subcommittee restrict these funds to BIE funded schools that have committed to 900 hours of immersion instruction. This proposed requirement will establish standards and guide corresponding site base leadership decisions in personnel, dedicated classroom space, and school culture in hosting immersion tracks.

The current iteration of the program conflates language instruction as a course and immersion as a medium of instruction. Grant money is also used for culturally based education which is important but unless delivered in the tribal language and in immersion setting should not be funded from this program. *Greater BIE oversight and fidelity to accepted constructs of immersion should be included in report language this will ensure that Congressional intent is honored.*

The BIE Native American Language Immersion initiative is congruent with President Biden's Indian Education Executive Order, the Native American Languages Act, the Snyder Act and other authorizations that fund BIA/BIE. In actuality the authority has always existed, but BIE needed Congress to direct them to engage in meaningful cultivation of true immersion opportunities.

The next logical step in addition to funding is that the Secretary of Interior promulgate a policy of Native Language development. In order to further the Federal Government's commitment to improving the educational outcomes of American Indian and Alaska Native students and improving the quality and performance of schools and education programs for American Indians and Alaska Natives, a comprehensive Native Language Development and Culturally Based Education policy is needed to: (1) help tribal governments meet the linguistically unique educational needs of their children, including the need to preserve, revitalize, and use their Native languages; (2) promote American Indian and Alaska Native tribal language immersion schools and develop capacity of tribal communities to build successful immersion schools; protect tribal language immersion schools from the promulgation of adverse rules, assessments, and regulations from federal agencies that are incongruent with existing statutes concerning Native language use; and (4) promote intergovernmental (tribal/federal) collaboration and partnership.

The Immersion effort in BIE started in the FY2017 omnibus when this Subcommittee included the initial 2 million investments within BIE education program enhancements for capacity building grants to expand language immersion opportunities. We thank this Subcommittee for breaking ground and request that report language include an assessment of immersion investments since the FY 2017.

By assessing and evaluating these key investments it will instruct BIE where improvements can be made in delivery of this program, where immersion support is appropriate across the 182-school system and what the impact has been on Native learners in immersion.

### ***Need for Increased Federal Support***

Both the LLGP and BIE Immersion program need increased federal support. Not only is the Alliance 25 million request credible in the eyes of Indian country but it is commensurate with the current need.

As language programs emerge from the COVID era a new reality confronts Tribal nations who suffered disproportionately. The loss of language speakers, heritage keepers, language instructors and ceremonial leaders has been staggering. The cumulative effect from program and instruction stoppage, loss of language capacity and general loss of momentum has exacerbated an already existing crisis. We are truly in a race against the clock, for some tribal communities a critical mass of speakers still exists, community ownership and values of language acquisition is strong, Tribal commitment is strong and leadership in both BIE systems and tribal governments are desirous of partnering with Interior to build impactful language revitalization efforts.

BIE schools and communities that wish to engage in the development of tribal language immersion schools need consistent annual federal support. Provided that BIE meet criteria and reporting requirements they should be funded annually. Interior would never consider offering a school wide math program on a competitive basis and only funded a year at a time. If BIE is to build purposeful immersion programs language instructors and support staff must receive a commitment from site-based leadership that there is an institutional commitment to immersion in the school for both reason of immersion integrity and continuity. How can BIE site-based leaders and BIE school boards make long term commitments to immersion if their funding source is on a year-to-year competitive basis. The Subcommittee can increase institutional commitment at BIE schools by directing BIE to engage in grants of up to 5 years for Immersion schools.

This federal support must be additional to and separate from that which currently exists to support BIE school operations. If Congress is to carry out its commitments to self – determination, sovereignty, and protection and revitalization of Native languages, it must provide consistent resources for Native language immersion schools.

The LLGP is a bold initiative funded at 15 million (2020-24), the Alliance request this investment be elevated to 25 million with all 574 Tribes being eligible for components of LLGP. The Federal Boarding School Report has brought to light and documented the incredible length the federal government engaged in investments and policy directives to eradicate Indian languages, culture, and religions. The federal government did so by targeting Indian children. Tribal communities continue to live with the devastating consequences of these federal policies funded in the billions of dollars by Congress and carried out by the executive branch. With the vast majority of Native languages extinct or on the verge of extinction the fierce urgency of now is at our doorstep. “Our” means all of us, not only are these sacred languages treasured by Indian country, but they are American treasures as well.

The investments made to separate Tribal nations and their most vulnerable members from their sacred birth right was substantial, and equal or greater investment to revitalize Native languages is appropriate.

***American Indian Religious Freedom Act.***

Congress sought to promote dual objectives in a single statute when it passed AIRFA in 1978. The first was to unequivocally state that First Amendment is guaranteed To American Indian and Alaska Native Peoples. The second was to declare a policy that ***“henceforth it shall be the policy of the United States to protect and preserve for American Indians their inherent right of freedom to believe, express, and exercise the traditional religions of the American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, and Native Hawaiians, including but not limited to access to sites, use and possession of sacred objects, and freedom to worship through ceremonials and traditional rites”***.

Protecting and investing in Native language revitalization is a necessary precursor to protecting and preserving Native religions and ceremonies. AIRFA itself is a repudiation of past policies of ceremonial and religious abridgment.

The Alliance has as others have offered perspectives with documented research and anecdotal research regarding the academic benefits of immersion and resiliency of bi-culturally competent Native youth. What we have not done until today is offer to this Subcommittee that our entire ceremonial structure and religious practices are contingent on the

Transfer of our languages the transmittal of Native language is inextricably linked to the transmittal of all our ceremonial and religious rights.

I thank this Subcommittee for holding these important hearings the only venue of its kind in the United States Congress where tribal leaders and grassroots stakeholders can come together and articulate the funding needs of Indian country and have ownership in the federal government’s execution of its Trust obligations.