

Senate Indian Affairs Committee, Washington, D.C.

S. Roach Language Narrative - Testimony

June 18, 2014 - 2:30 PM

Ade' (hello) Chairman and members of this committee. My name is Sonta Hamilton Roach, and I am Deg Hit'an Athabascan from Shageluk. Shageluk is my hometown, with roughly 80 people, and where I currently work as a teacher. Add Shageluk info, more picture. Add words and language in Athabascan.

It is truly an honor to be here today, to carry the Alaskan torch, and to testify in support of Senate Bill 1958, and Senate Bill 2299, fostering the revitalization efforts of Native American language programs. At this point in time, and in the history of indigenous languages, these two bills will strongly and positively impact revitalization efforts. I would say that the timing is perfect, but in the same breath, I'd say that its unfortunate that our languages were ever so endangered and that this time had to come at all.

Today across Alaska, the seeds have been planted and there are several successful language models and programs that have been developed. But only at a small scale. These seeds need water. To be successful in revitalization, we need systemic change from systems of power that includes schools, Tribes, Native corporations and non-for profits to work together in partnership with state agencies and the federal government. These bills allow for that to happen!

Our Indigenous languages have been endangered for generations. Our languages were especially impacted when that young girl or boy was first punished for speaking their language in BIA and mission run schools. Language, being the closest thing to our identity and knowledge base we have, was stripped from us - for talking Deg Xinag, my people's language.. This wasn't eons ago, this was my grandpa, this was my grandma. These are "our" grandparents. These children cannot speak our languages all because they went to school. This is the legacy I am living with as a teacher.

AND today, we are a new generation, those of us in this room. We share a new and exciting view of ourselves, of our communities, and of our nation and the potential that exists in all of us to speak and celebrate our languages. It's the view that we as Native people have to impact language learning from our cultural lens.

So what does language learning include? Language learning includes immersion camps, language nests, distance delivered language learning, and more! For example, schools in the Yupi'k region have very successful immersion models for early childhood education, and its directly linked to higher student achievement and success rate. Add citation for written record. I've had the privilege to visit Ayaprun Elitnaurvik immersion school in Bethel, Alaska, and I've never felt so privileged to step into anyone's classroom before! The environment encouraged and nurtured cultural values, self-identity, and language. The sense of place was sacred, holistically nurturing students in their learning. The proposed legislation can grow this experience, creating success in our students.

Language learning also includes the Koyukuk Athabascan language program through the Yukon Koyukuk School District that is taught via video conferencing to several isolated sites across the district, and very successfully. The Gwich'in have also recently taken significant strides in their language efforts, and have new programs underway. And in the North Slope Borough School District, students learn their Inupiaq language dialects online! And finally, just this spring the Alaska state legislature passed House Bill 216 adopting Native languages as official languages of the State of Alaska. Representative Johnathan Kriess-Tomkins stated for the record that the bill was, "An important step in recognizing the living, breathing Alaska Native languages of the state of Alaska, which continues to grow into daily use by many speakers around the state who both practice and teach and has been done for millennia prior to statehood."

How will this legislation change, impact, or improve language learning? First, it will be that hook that teachers use in the classroom to engage students in their lesson. It will keep students coming into school each and every day, that motivates them and maybe even gives them something to live for, literally. It's more than just cultural pride, or just learning a language, it's learning a knowledge base, a skill-base, and learning who they are!

Language is just like looking through the lens of someone's culture, the depth of who they are and their experiences, their relationship to land and animals. Place-based and cultural-based education keeps students engaged and increases student achievement. In Rural Alaska our communities are plagued with high suicide rates, and high drop out rates, which correlate directly with a loss in culture and language. The key to changing this, is support for relevant curriculum, support for programs like those in Bethel at Ayaprun. If this committee can encourage these efforts, we will have strengthened Native Americans across the country.

Like our national parks, our indigenous languages and cultures are our national treasures. The ecological knowledge and understanding of living off the land and using resources is a treasure. The oral and traditional stories, told through the language, is a treasure. These bills will ensure that our precious treasures will not be lost, but used daily in the lives of many.

Michael Krauss, a linguist and expert in Alaska Native and Indigenous languages said that out of 300 North American languages, only 200 or 210 languages are spoken today, and in Alaska, there are 18 without any children speakers at all.

In conclusion, this legislation is a positive turning point in our nation that acknowledges the grassroots efforts that are being made to continue keeping languages alive today, it brings light to those Elders who were beaten for speaking, and it empowers the young people to take the lead in solidifying our languages as national treasures.

It is my hope that this legislation is passed quickly and my belief that Native Americans will take this opportunity to truly revitalize indigenous languages to the fullest extent possible, that systemic change will occur, and Elders will hear their grandchildren and great-grandchildren speaking their language once again. Our children will go to school not having to change thinking caps, or change the lens in which they view the world every single day. But rather, the systems are put into place to promote and foster educational and economic advancement and truly benefit the next generation.

I would say thank you. But historically, in our language there is no word for it. Our relationship is based on reciprocity, and I know our relationship will continue to grow. I appreciate your time. Language addition.