



NATIONAL INDIAN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

May 22, 2020

The Honorable Brian Schatz
722 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

On behalf of the National Indian Education Association (NIEA), I respectfully submit the following letter of support for the establishment of a Native American Languages Resource Center (“the Center”). NIEA is the nation’s most inclusive organization advocating for improved educational opportunities for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians. Our mission centers on ensuring that Native students have access to a high-quality academic and cultural education, a goal that is only possible if Congress upholds the federal trust responsibility, a moral obligation towards tribes.

Congress has a federal trust responsibility for the education of Native students. Established through treaties, federal law, and U.S. Supreme Court decisions, the federal government’s trust responsibility to tribes includes the obligation to provide parity in access and equitable resources to all American Indian and Alaska Native students, regardless of where they attend school. Resources and funding to preserve and revitalize Native languages are a critical part of the federal trust responsibility, an obligation shared between the Congress and the Administration for federally-recognized tribes.

Native languages are fundamental to the cultural fabric of Native identities. Interwoven into ceremonies, histories, and traditions, language is at the heart of Native cultures. Studies have shown that Native students thrive when Native language and culture is a core component of the classroom. Language preservation and revitalization programs are integral to ensuring that Native students have equitable access to opportunities for success through culturally relevant education options. Prior to the current outbreak of the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19), it was estimated that 74 Native languages could disappear within the next decade, and only 20 Native languages will be spoken by 2050. NIEA and its members urge passage of legislation that preserve the gains resulting from decades of work to prevent the disappearance of Native languages as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Since the Center would not be located in a single location, it is designed in such a way as to reflect the diversity of Native American languages, cultures and communities throughout the United States. The resources of the Center are in line with NIEA’s goals of building and expanding Native language schools and programs, assessing how these languages are taught, and developing pathways to expand the cultural responsibility and fluency of Native language teachers. Finally, the Center would also provide necessary resources and best practices to support distance learning – a serious concern during the current crisis given the lack of widespread access to broadband and other technology in Indian Country.

Native language revitalization and preservation is critical to the well-being and success of Native students and communities for generations to come. Tribes, schools, and Native communities must have access to resources to build and strengthen Native languages to ensure student success. For more information or inquiries, please contact Adrienne Elliott, NIEA Senior Legislative Associate, at aelliott@niea.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marita Hinds". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small dot above the letter 'i' in "Hinds".

Marita Hinds
President