

September 8, 2014

The Honorable Harry Reid
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
S-221 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
S-230 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Boehner
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
232 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
204 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Majority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
107 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Enactment of the S. 1948 and H.R. 4214 – *Native Language Immersion Student Achievement Act*

Dear Congressional Leaders:

The undersigned Native organizations are partnering together to respectfully petition the United States Senate and House of Representatives for swift passage of S. 1948 and H.R. 4214 – the *Native Language Immersion Student Achievement Act*. This crucial legislation helps to address a dual crisis in Indian country, the rapid loss of Native languages, and a growing achievement gap among Native and non-Native students.

We are pleased that S. 1948, the bi-partisan *Native Language Immersion Student Achievement Act*, introduced by Senator Tester with Senator Murkowski as a lead co-sponsor, has been voted out of Committee and is ready for floor action. We are hopeful that H.R. 4214, the bi-partisan companion bill introduced by Representatives Tom Cole (R-OK) and Betty McCollum (D-MN) – the bipartisan House Native American Caucus Co-Chairs – will be acted upon when the House returns from August recess.

Congress has always shown strong, bi-partisan support for Native languages and education legislation. Some key examples include, the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Act, Navajo Code Talker Recognition Act, and Native American Code Talker Recognition Act. These Acts of Congress celebrate the patriotic contributions of Native peoples and their languages and substantiate a policy of linguistic and cultural preservation and restoration.

Congress enacted the Indian Education Act in 1972 in response to devastating federal policy that stripped tribes of any control or ability to participate in the education of their children. The Indian Education Act in its current iteration is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Title VII. The overarching goal of the Indian Education Act is to provide a comprehensive approach to Indian education and restore inclusion of Native parents and tribal communities in the education of their children. Still codified in statute, the Act promoted the objective that the “unique educational and cultural needs of Native learners . . . be met in a comprehensive manner.”

Yet, government-supported studies have found that current techniques and strategies promulgated by the Department of Education through state education agencies and the BIE have failed to close the achievement gap for Native learners. In fact, the achievement gap has widened between Native students and their counterparts since passage of the No Child Left Behind Act – the current iteration of ESEA.

Hence, prompt congressional action is needed to strengthen Title VII and equip Native communities with the necessary tools to promote academic achievement through Native language immersion schools.

During the 113th Congress, the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee passed S. 1094 – *the Strengthening America's Schools Act* – which could move to the full Senate at any time. In its version of the ESEA reauthorization, the Senate excluded this immersion grant program as well as other recommendations from tribal nations, tribal leaders, the National Indian Education Association, National Congress of American Indians, and numerous other organizations. Similarly, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 5 – *The Student Success Act* – in the summer of 2013 to reauthorize ESEA, but it left Title VII largely unimproved and excluded this immersion grant program.

Now in its 42nd year, the Indian Education Act should be modernized to include the growing body of educational research that establishes Native language immersion schools as an emerging “best practice” in the field of Indian education. Native immersion schools are public, tribal, or private community-based schools that utilize the Native language as the primary medium of instruction to deliver academic content. The *Native Language Immersion Student Achievement Act* would amend ESEA Title VII to create a Part D authorizing the Secretary of Education to award competitive grants to eligible immersion schools.

We request that Congress move to modernize ESEA Title VII by providing full-time immersion opportunities for Native students in order to protect and strengthen their languages and increase student outcomes. S. 1948’s and H.R. 4214’s purpose within the broader ESEA is unique as it will sharpen the focus of Title VII and honor the congressional intent of providing for the unique educational and cultural needs of Native learners.

We thank you for your efforts to push Native children closer to the front of America’s agenda as they are often this country’s most vulnerable population, and we look forward to continuing our work on passage of this crucial legislation.

Sincerely,

Advocates for Indigenous California Languages
Alaska Federation of Natives
American Indian Higher Education Consortium
American Indian Language Development
Institute at the University of Arizona
American Indian Language Policy Research and
Teacher Training Center at University of New
Mexico
Coalition of Large Tribes
Cultural Survival
Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council, Inc.
Great Plains Tribal Chairman Association
Indigenous Language Institute
Lakota Language Consortium
Language Conservancy

Linguistics Society of America
Office of Hawaiian Affairs
Midwest Alliance of Sovereign Tribes
National Alliance to Save Native Languages
National Congress of American Indians
National Indian Education Association
Navajo Nation
New York State Indian Education Association
Sealaska Heritage Institute
Self-Governance Communications and
Education Tribal Consortium
Tribal Education Departments National
Assembly
United South and Eastern Tribes
United Tribes of Michigan

cc: The Honorable Jon Tester, Senate Committee of Indian Affairs Chairman
The Honorable John Barrasso, Senate Committee of Indian Affairs Vice-Chairman
The Honorable Tom Harkin, Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Chairman
The Honorable Lamar Alexander, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Ranking Member
The Honorable Tom Harkin, Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related
Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman
The Honorable Jerry Moran, Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related
Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee Ranking Member

The Honorable Jack Kingston, Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman
The Honorable Rosa DeLauro, Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee Ranking Member
The Honorable John Kline, Committee on Education and the Workforce Chairman
The Honorable George Miller, Committee on Education and the Workforce Ranking Member
The Honorable Tom Cole, Native American Caucus Co-Chair
The Honorable Betty McCollum, Native American Caucus Co-Chair
The Honorable Arne Duncan, U.S. Department of Education Secretary
Jodi Gillette, White House Senior Policy Advisor for Native American Affairs
Joyce Silverthorne, U.S. Department of Education Office of Indian Education Director
William Mendoza, White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education Executive Director