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Blackfeet push to preserve language

Bill would help schools teach native tongues

By CHRISTOPHER STEINER For the Great Falls Tribune

WASHINGTON -- Two Blackfeet teachers urged a U.S. Senate committee this week to approve a bill intended to ensure that Native American languages don't vanish.

The bill would offer grants to schools starting or continuing native language programs. Dollar figures for the bill are not yet available.

Of the 300 tribal languages indigenous to the Americas, only 175 are alive today, according to the National Indian Education Association. In 50 years, the group says, as few as 20 could be left.

"The loss of native languages diminishes the truth of native ways and dishonors the lifetimes of our ancestors," Rosalyn LaPier told the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. "True native history is identified by the stories extending back thousands of years and retold out loud in our native languages."

LaPier, director of the Piegan Institute's Nizipuhwahsin School on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, and teacher Jocelyn Davis-DesRosier appeared before the committee Thursday to explain how the school teaches core subjects in the Blackfeet tongue. The Piegan Institute was founded in 1987 to preserve and promote the native Blackfeet language. In 1995, the institute started the Nizipuhwahsin School, which has 32 students, all children in the Blackfeet Tribe.

The bill, introduced by Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, would amend 1990 legislation that protected the rights of Indians to promote and speak their native languages to fiscally support the programs which it guards. No similar legislation has been introduced in the House.

The 1990 bill marked an official reversal in policy for the U.S. government -- which at one time persecuted those who spoke native tongues.

An 1868 report from the federal commission on Indian affairs read: "Their barbarous dialect should be blotted out and the English language substituted."

Davis-DesRosier, who is learning the Blackfeet language, sends her two boys to the school where she teaches. Early on, she said, her friends and relatives warned her against sending her children to the native-language school, saying her sons "would have lower academic achievement and would never make the transition to public

school." The doubters have been proved wrong, she said.

"Learning academic subjects in the Blackfeet language has not diminished their academic ability, but enhanced it," she said.

This is the case for most children, according to Leanne Hinton, professor and chairwoman of the Department of Linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley.

"We know through their intense hard work and leadership that these systems work successfully to educate students to be literate and fluent in their ancestral language and accustomed to using it in daily communications and also are literate and fluent in English, and fully prepared to go on to higher education in English-speaking institutions," she said to the committee.

That's exactly the way things have played out at Nizipuhwahsin, said Shirlee Crowshoe in an interview from the school where she is one of two teachers who are fully fluent in the native tongue.

"We have had many children go on to the public high schools and have no problems," she said.

There would be many more of those children if the school had more fluent teachers like her, she said. Because there are only two teachers fluent in the language at the school, which teaches children from kindergarten through eighth grade, it has to limit its enrollment to around 30. There is a waiting list of more than 100 children, despite the tuition of about \$100 a month.

This is why, Crowshoe said, the teachers are rooting so hard for the bill to pass -- they need more funding to entice a few of the remaining fluent Blackfeet speakers to teach. Fluent speakers, she said, are scarce -- a survey taken by the Blackfeet in the mid-1990s revealed roughly 200 fluent speakers out of a tribal population of about 15,000.

At one time the school employed as many as six fluent speakers, she said.

"But funding is such a big factor, we just couldn't afford to bring them on again."

Christopher Steiner is a reporter for Medill News Service.