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Endangered languages of our ancestors can flourish again

By Richard B. Williams

Indian Country faces a historically unparalleled affront to our cultural survival. Of the 300 Native languages spoken at the time of European contact, it is estimated only 20 of these languages will still be viable in 2050. The rest will be irrevocably lost, and with them will go the traditional knowledge that has sustained our people since time immemorial.

The impact will not be limited to Indian Country alone. The loss of cultural, spiritual, medicinal and historical indigenous knowledge has ramifications for all.

If we continue to ignore these truths, this loss will come to pass just as certainly as the sun continues to rise and set in the sky. Yet, just as an eclipse shows us that sometimes the inevitable patterns of nature can be altered, so do we have the ability to change our future when it comes to saving our languages. But we cannot wait.

Fortunately, we are blessed to have the solution to language recovery in our hands. Offered to us by our indigenous brothers and sisters from around the globe, the language-immersion education programs developed by the Maori of New Zealand and Native Hawaiians have shown us that we can reverse the rapid loss of our languages.

From them, we know that it is possible for our languages to flourish again.

Not that long ago, the Maori and Native Hawaiians faced exactly the same scenario that we now face. Fluent speakers had dwindled to only a mere handful of elders. Children not only struggled to grasp their cultural identity, but they also struggled to find success or meaning in education.

But then, a small group of dedicated parents started gathering to teach their children the languages that they were unwilling to let die. They gathered in living rooms, garages, backyards or wherever they could find space. As people began to notice the children speaking their languages, more parents flocked to these "language nests." With time, the living rooms became classrooms and the nests became fully developed immersion education systems.

Today, Maori and Hawaiian speakers number in the thousands. Children are no longer lost in the educational system. They are unafraid to succeed and thrive. As one Maori educator told me when I visited New Zealand in 2004, they are "fiercely Maori."

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