

The Esther Martinez Native Languages Preservation Act, which supports Native American language immersion programs, language survival schools and language restoration programs, was signed into law in 2006 but requires reauthorization by Congress every six years.

The Senate passed the bill unanimously Nov. 29 and sent it to the House of Representatives for a vote. Once both houses of Congress approve it, the Act will be in place until 2023.

According to the National Indian Education Association, monetary grants provided by the law have empowered Native communities to establish immersion programs that are successfully revitalizing Native languages. One of NIEA's priorities is preserving language and culture, which goes to the heart of Native identity.

Marcus Briggs-Cloud, who runs the Creek language enrichment program in Brighton, lobbied for the bill in 2006 and in 2011 on behalf of the National Alliance to Save Native Languages and Cultural Survival.

"The grants are most important because immersions programs, above any other methodology, are most effective at generating fluent speakers," Briggs-Cloud said. "There are immersion programs that we want to see succeed because we draw strength and encouragement from one another in this journey to perpetuate our languages. When Esther Martinez grants aid these other programs, we feel that positive energy."

The Creek language enrichment program, located in a portable at Pemayetv Emahakv Charter School in Brighton, opened in 2015 with 10 non-verbal babies who learned the language through everyday conversation with teachers, elders and each other. There are 13 in the program today, all of whom are fluent for their age.

"Our kids are talking outside of the program," Briggs-Cloud said. "When they see these elders in the community, they speak to them in the language. It comes very naturally because they are first language speakers."

The goal of the program is to revitalize the language and create fluent speakers. Since real fluency depends on using the language at home, parents are required to participate in the program and attend a weekly adult language class, use words and commands at home and take their child to see an elder speaker once a week.

"All you have to do is speak and speak to the children and they will catch on," Jennie Shore said in October, when she was named NIEA Elder of the Year for her work in the immersion program. "I want people to learn the language. Whatever I know, I'm willing to share."

Although PECS curriculum includes daily language classes, Briggs-Cloud believes it takes a lot more to become fluent.

"We all learned to be fluent because we were immersed in language," Briggs-Cloud said. "Language programs should set goals and there should be only one; fluency."

Please follow and like us:

