

Indigenous languages should be part of early childhood education, professor says ^[1]

Federal bill aimed at promoting Indigenous languages falls short, Andrea Nicholas Bear says

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EXCERPTS

Federal legislation that would set up a commissioner of Indigenous languages won't help the many languages already endangered because of a shortage of speakers, a professor in Fredericton says.

"We are really facing the wall and especially with no child speakers," said Andrea Bear Nicholas, professor emeritus at St. Thomas University, who spent most of her career as the chair of Native studies at STU.

Bear Nicholas said Indigenous parents should have equal rights when it comes to their children being taught in their ancestral language.

"If Canada says it really cares about our languages, the idea of immersion schooling or of schooling conducted entirely in our languages, is really the Cadillac of how one will revive and revitalize a language," she said.

Under Bill C-91, an office of the commissioner of Indigenous languages would be created to protect and promote languages that include Cree, Ojibway, Oji-Cree, Mohawk, Mi'kmaq, Michif (the native tongue of some Métis) and Inuktitut, among dozens of others that are still spoken in Canada.

Three-quarters of the 90 different living Indigenous languages in Canada are said to be endangered.

But if Bill C-91 goes ahead, Bear Nicholas said, Indigenous languages will be in more trouble than they are now.

"It contains no language rights specified, no obligations on the government to respect and honour them and no enforcement mechanisms," she said.

On the matter of rights, the proposed legislation refers to Section 35 of the Constitution, which recognizes existing treating rights.

Revitalizing a language

Although the bill would not grant any particular Indigenous language official status, it would allow for the translation of federal documents into Indigenous languages and provide interpretation services to "facilitate the use of an Indigenous language in the course of [a] federal institution's activities."

Bear Nicholas said people who share her belief that language preservation starts inside the classroom shared their concerns with a Commons committee that looked at the bill.

"There is nothing to having a right unless you provide the means to achieve that right."

To do that, she said, there needs to be curriculum development, teachers need to be trained and children need to be immersed in the language.

"Those core language programs, they're taking our best speakers and putting them in a program," Bear Nicholas said. "That is obviously not going to work because our children are not required to think and function in all subject areas in our language."

Across Canada, there are immersion schools dedicated to Indigenous language, but Bear Nicholas would also like to see immediate funding for elders to assist in pre-school programs across New Brunswick.

"We would have speakers by the time those children are six years old," she said.

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Region: New Brunswick ^[3]

childhood-education

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