



First Peoples'
Heritage, Language &
Culture Council

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Report Urges Action for B.C.'s First Nations Languages

BRENTWOOD BAY – The First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council (the First Peoples' Council) has published a report that reveals the troubling state of British Columbia's First Nations languages. The first annual *Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages 2010* provides concrete data on the province's First Nations languages, including the numbers of speakers and resources for each language, as well as community efforts to stem language loss.

The report finds that fluent First Nations language speakers make up a small and shrinking minority of the B.C. First Nations population. It also reveals that most fluent speakers are over 65, the number of semi-fluent speakers is small and the majority of classroom language teaching is insufficient to create enough new fluent speakers to revitalize a language.

“British Columbia is home to 60% of the indigenous languages in Canada as well as distinct language families not found anywhere else in the world,” says Dr. Lorna Williams, Chair of the Board at the First Peoples' Council and Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Knowledge and Learning at the University of Victoria. “The cultural and linguistic diversity of B.C. is a priceless treasure for all of humanity and this report shows that more must be done to protect it.”

On the positive side, the report provides several examples of language revitalization work in First Nations communities. It also indicates that many semi-fluent speakers and the majority of language learners are under the age of 25, which points to the growth of community-based language revitalization projects across the province.

KEY FINDINGS

The report recognizes that there are different ways to measure and define language endangerment. Given the diversity of B.C. languages, the report uses three variables to measure language endangerment in B.C.—speakers, usage and language resources.

SPEAKERS (measures the ages, numbers and percentage of speakers of First Nations languages)

- Fluent First Nations language speakers make up 5.1% of the reporting population and most of them are over the age of 65.
- Those that reported as “semi-fluent” make up 8.2% of the reporting population. The level of fluency varies widely in the semi-fluent speaker group.
- Combined, fluent and semi-fluent speakers make up 13.3% of the First Nations population.
- 11.1% of the reporting population is learning a First Nations language. The level of education that these learners receive is often insufficient to create new fluent speakers.

USAGE (where and how much the language is being spoken and taught)

- Typically, a student enrolled in a First Nations operated school spends one to four hours learning a First Nations language per week (excluding immersion schools).

- However, 34% of students attending a First Nations operated school or Head Start program reported that they are not learning a First Nations language.
- In the majority of communities, a First Nations language is rarely spoken at home, at work or in the media.

LANGUAGE RESOURCES (the level of documentation, recordings, archives and curriculum materials for a language)

- 31% of communities have recordings of their languages available as a community resource.
- Although archiving is necessary for the survival of endangered languages, only 39% of communities reported having access to a FirstVoices.com archive for their language.
- 52% have curriculum materials for teaching their language.

“With this report, we now have concrete evidence of what we have known for some time: all First Nations languages in B.C. are in a critical state,” says Williams. “I am encouraged by the many fantastic community-based language programs detailed in the report, but unfortunately, they are not enough to stem the loss. I sincerely hope this report is recognized as a call-to-action to save our languages before it is too late.”

INPUT FROM COMMUNITIES

The report would not have been possible without input from communities. The report’s data was taken from a database of Language Needs Assessments that were filled out by community organizations when they applied for language funding from the First Peoples’ Council. Through Language Needs Assessments, communities identify language resources and projects in their communities as well as the gaps in these areas. Based on these assessments, communities can set their priorities and goals accordingly.

The First Peoples’ Council urges communities to update their information and report any inaccuracies in the report by filling out a Language Needs Assessment (<http://maps.fphlcc.ca/lna>) that will be added to the next version of the report.

Visit www.fphlcc.ca to download a copy of the report.

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About the First Peoples’ Heritage, Language and Culture Council:

The First Peoples’ Council is a B.C. Crown corporation with the mandate to support First Nations in their efforts to revitalize their languages, arts, cultures and heritage. The First Peoples’ Council has distributed more than \$21.5 million to B.C. Aboriginal communities over the past 20 years. For more information, visit www.fphlcc.ca.

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