

MIKE McCLEARY/Tribune Ryan Wilson, president of the National Indian Education Association, recently listened to Tex Hall, chairman of the Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara Nation, during a press conference dealing with the loss of native languages and the connection between those languages and academic performance in Native American students Thursday at United Tribes Technical College in Bismarck. July 27, 2006

Indigenous languages will die out in America unless Congress acts soon, a leader in Indian education said Thursday.

"We're on the very verge of losing our languages," said Ryan Wilson, president of the National Indian Education Association.

"We don't have tomorrow. This has to happen today."

Wilson spoke at United Tribes Technical College in a press conference regarding legislation to preserve American Indian languages. Also speaking at the conference were Tex Hall, chairman of the Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara Nation, and David Gipp, UTTC president. The conference promoted passage of a bill co-sponsored by Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., that would create grants to establish immersion schools where Indian children could learn their traditional language. Before Europeans came to America, there were about 500 different American Indian languages, Wilson said. Fewer than 100 have survived, and only 20 are spoken by American Indian children.

Immersion schools are important for two major reasons, Wilson said. First, indigenous languages are an important part of America's culture and history. Second, research has shown that Indian students do better academically when the lessons are relevant to their culture, he said. Language is an important part of that.

At a language immersion school, of which there are already a few in the country for Indian students, children learn traditional languages and are then taught other subjects in the language. Most of the schools focus on young students, for whom it is easier to pick up new languages. Graduates of the existing programs have been more academically successful than students at traditional schools, Wilson said.

There are far too few of the schools, though, he said.

"You have one system that's scientifically proven, beyond a shadow of a doubt, to fail our kids," Wilson said. "Here's another system that might be a potential answer."

Furthermore, he said, other research has shown that studying any language fosters intellectual development. For Indian students, an indigenous language is the logical choice for study, he said.

At Thursday's conference, Indian leaders urged Dorgan to continue championing the cause, and push to get the bill signed into law in this congressional session. Dorgan is the vice chairman of the senate's Committee for Indian Affairs.

"Indian country is resting its hopes on him," Wilson said. "He's the only one that can carry water on this."

The bill doesn't set a fixed dollar amount, but Wilson said the program would likely cost around \$8 million.

Fast action is important because some languages have only a few remaining speakers, said Tex Hall. There are only 8 people alive who speak Mandan fluently, he said.

"If we don't do this now, it will be gone," Hall said. "These speakers are passing on. When they pass, they take a wealth of knowledge with them."

One reason there are so few speakers is because the government discouraged previous generations from speaking or learning indigenous languages in an attempt to force cultural assimilation, Wilson said. Many Indians attended boarding schools, where they were punished if caught speaking their native tongue.

"We know that while that was well-intentioned ... we also know that it did great damage to Indians," Wilson said. "We're not playing the role of victims; we don't believe in that. But the U.S. government made the biggest investment in the destruction of the languages, and it should make a commensurate investment in helping to bring them back."

Wilson said that while most immigrants in the country's

history

have been eager to assimilate, American Indians traditionally have not shared that desire. That is something mainstream America has struggled to understand, but is the right of Indians, nonetheless, he said.

"We ceded millions of acres of the most productive land in the world for the right of continued sovereignty,"he said.
"It's our right. We've already paid for this."

