



MARY FELZKOWSKI

STATE SENATOR • 12TH SENATE DISTRICT

Testimony for SB 85, 86, 87, 88, and 89

Senator Mary Felzkowski

Committee on Government Operations, Labor and Economic Development

March 12, 2025

Good morning, Chairman Feyen and Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bills 85, 86, 87, 88, and 89. This past summer and fall I served as the vice-chair of the Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations, during which time I had the pleasure of working with tribal members and legislators from throughout our great State. The outcome of this committee are these five commonsense bills that are before you today.

Senate Bill 85 provides that a school board or charter school cannot prohibit a pupil with tribal affiliation from wearing traditional tribal regalia at a graduation ceremony or school-sponsored event. It was requested by tribal members to ensure all tribal-affiliated students are able to wear tribal regalia at graduation ceremonies. Last session, in the Assembly the bill passed unanimously out of committee and the entire body on a voice vote, but did not receive a hearing in the Senate. This interim, the tribal committee members reemphasized that the ability to wear regalia at graduation ceremonies was an ongoing problem for their members, so the committee again recommended the bill for introduction.

Senate Bill 86 adds tribal governments and their employees to the list of persons who are authorized to copy a certified copy of a vital record (such as a birth certificate) for administrative use by the authorized entity. Currently, the list of entities that are authorized to make these copies include financial institutions, state agencies, county departments, and their employees. Making an unauthorized copy is a Class I felony, punishable by a fine up to \$10,000, prison for up to three and a half years, or both. Last session, in the Assembly the bill passed unanimously out of committee and the entire body on a voice vote, and in the Senate passed out of committee but no further action was taken. Tribal members reiterated that their government employees need to retain copies of vital records to establish and verify membership, so the committee recommended the bill for introduction again.

Senate Bill 87 provides an option for a tribal government to determine whether a person licensed to teach an American Indian language is qualified to receive a lifetime teaching license. Currently, when an individual applies for a Tier II (three-year provisional) license to teach an American Indian Language in an American Indian Language Program, the applicant must be certified as competent in the given language by the applicable tribal council, tribal language division, or local American Indian parent advisory committee. There is no additional certification of competence requirement for applicants of a Tier III lifetime license to teach an American Indian Language in an American Indian Language Program.

The bill allows tribal governments to opt in to review applicants for Tier III lifetime licenses for an American Indian language associated with that tribe or band. Once opted in, DPI would notify the tribe or band whenever an applicant applies for a Tier III license in a language associated with the tribal government. The tribal government would then determine and notify DPI whether the applicant is highly skilled and endorse the applicant receiving a Tier III lifetime license, or whether the applicant is not highly skilled and should instead

retain a Tier II license. This additional certification does not change any of the other requirements already necessary to obtain a Tier III license.

Last session, in the Assembly this bill passed unanimously out of committee and the entire body on a voice vote, but did not receive a hearing in the Senate. This interim, committee members asked the bill to be reintroduced again this session.

Senate Bill 88 allows any tribal school teacher to serve on the Professional Standards Council for Teachers. Under current law, one of the members of the Professional Standards Council for Teachers, which advises the State Superintendent, must be a licensed teacher employed at a tribal school and recommended by a federally recognized American Indian tribe or band in this state with a tribal school. Under the bill, this member would not need to be licensed by DPI, but would still need to be a teacher employed at a tribal school. DPI requested this change as the position has been vacant for some time, due to the fact that teachers at tribal schools do not need a DPI license. This is the first session this bill has been considered by the Committee on State-Tribal Relations.

Senate Bill 89 requires that school districts include in their annual report to DPI the numbers, ages, and tribal affiliation of American Indian children attending the school district beginning in the 2026-2027 school year. Currently, school districts are required to report various information annually to DPI, including demographic information about its pupils. Also, DPI must make an annual assessment of the needs and evaluation of resources for the American Indian Language and Culture Education Program. DPI has requested school district report information relating to the numbers, ages, and tribal affiliation of American Indian children attending the school district, but currently such reporting is only voluntary, so not all school districts report this information. This bill makes that reporting required. Last session, the bill was voted out of committee but was not voted on by the entire Assembly, and did not receive a hearing in the Senate.

I want to thank Chair Mursau for his work on the Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations. Steve McCarthy and Abby Gorzlaneyk from Legislative Council are here with me today to help answer any questions. Thank you for considering these bills.



Jeff Mursau

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 36TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

SENATE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS, LABOR AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Senate Bills 85, 86, 87, 88, 89

March 12, 2025

Good morning, members of the Senate Committee on Government Operations, Labor and Economic Development. During this past interim, I again served as the chairperson of the Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations.

The State-Tribal Relations committee is a permanent committee created to study issues relating to American Indian tribes and to develop legislative proposals. Membership of the study committee consisted of two Senators, four Representatives, and 11 public members representing the interests of the state's tribes. The study committee met four times from August to December 2024.

The committee discussed numerous topics of importance to the state's tribes. In concluding its work, the committee recommended five bill drafts for introduction by the Joint Legislative Council, all of which are before this committee today.

Senate Bill 85 provides that school boards and charter schools may not prohibit a pupil with certain tribal affiliation from wearing traditional tribal regalia at a graduation ceremony or school-sponsored event.

Senate Bill 86 adds tribal governments and their employees to the list of persons who are authorized to copy a certified copy of a vital record for administrative use by the authorized entity.

Senate Bill 87 provides an option for a tribe to determine whether a person licensed to teach an American Indian language is qualified to receive a lifetime teaching license.

Senate Bill 88 allow any tribal school teacher to serve on the Professional Standards Council for Teachers.

Senate Bill 89 requires that school districts include in their annual report to DPI the numbers, ages, and tribal affiliation of American Indian children attending the school district beginning in the 2026-2027 school year.

All of these bills were recommended for introduction by State-Tribal Relations committee and Joint Legislative Council by unanimous votes.

Steve McCarthy and Abby Gorzlancyk from Legislative Council are here with me today to help answer any questions. Thank you for considering this bill.



Oneida Nation
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To: Senator Dan Feyen, Chair
Members of the Senate Committee on Operations, Labor & Economic Development

From: Lisa Liggins, Oneida Nation Secretary

Date: Wednesday, March 12, 2025

Re: Support for SB-87: Lifetime Language License for Teachers Bill recommended by the Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations

Shekoli Chairman Feyen and Members of the Senate Committee on Operations, Labor & Economic Development.

My name is Lisa Liggins, I serve as Tribal Secretary, an elected office of the Oneida Nation. I also served on the State of Wisconsin Joint Legislative Council Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations.

I would first like to thank the Committee Chair for scheduling a public hearing on this bill recommended by the Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations. I would also like to thank Representative Jeff Mursau, who chairs the Special Committee and the other legislators that served: Senator Felzkowski (Vice-Chair), Senator Smith, Rep. Conley, Rep. Edming, and Rep. Rozar.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of SB-87 that strengthens tribal sovereignty in determining qualifications for educators of American Indian languages. I am here to emphasize the importance of this legislation in preserving, revitalizing, and sustaining our Indigenous languages while ensuring that our communities have direct input in the certification of language educators.

Under current law, individuals seeking a tier III lifetime teaching license must complete six semesters of teaching experience. While this process may work for general education subjects, it does not necessarily reflect the cultural and linguistic expertise required to teach an Indigenous language authentically and effectively. This bill appropriately recognizes the unique role of tribal governments in determining who is qualified to teach their respective languages.

Language is central to cultural identity, historical preservation, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Many American Indian languages are at risk of disappearing, making it imperative that tribal communities have a direct say in who is qualified to teach them. Tribal leaders and fluent speakers are the most knowledgeable in assessing an individual's fluency, comprehension, and ability to pass the language on to future generations.

The bill provides an option for Tribal Governments in Wisconsin to decide whether an applicant is qualified for a lifetime teaching license in their respective language. It establishes a framework on which a tribal government may notify the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) that it wishes to review applicants for a lifetime license to teach the American Indian language associated with the Nation. DPI must notify the tribal government whenever an individual applies for such a license. The tribal government must assess the applicant's language skills and notify DPI of its decision. If the individual is highly skilled, the tribe may endorse the applicant for a tier III lifetime license. If the individual is not highly skilled, the tribe may endorse them for a tier II license renewal instead. DPI may only grant a tier III lifetime license if the applicant meets all other requirements and receives the tribal government's endorsement.

Regular teaching staff have the opportunity to earn a lifetime license after obtaining a degree and completing five years of teaching in a school. Once they meet these requirements, they are granted a lifetime license. However, language and culture instructors do not receive the same opportunity. Those who are certified through a letter from a tribal elder, verifying their proficiency to teach language, but who do not possess a four-year teaching degree, are only eligible for five-year renewable licenses. This discrepancy creates an inequitable system for highly skilled language educators who play a critical role in preserving and teaching Indigenous languages.

I strongly urge this committee to support and advance this bill. By passing this bill, the State will be making a significant investment in Indigenous language revitalization and honoring its commitment to working in partnership with tribal nations. It is with a good mind, a good heart, and strong fire I say yawako for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions at this time.

MLCC recertifies Language Instructors for upcoming school year



P. Delabruue/Menominee Nation News

(L-R) Alexandria Corn, Adrienne Tucker, Justine Pyawasay, Robert Tourtillott & Celine Martin and 8 other instructors prove their language fluency and commitment to teaching Menominee students.

Patrick L. Delabruue
Menominee Nation News

Following a battery of exercises to test their command of the Menominee language, a group of Menominee language instructors were recertified to continue teaching in the school district.

On Tuesday, August 15, the

Menominee Language and Culture Commission recertified 13 Menominee language instructors after completing their recertification tests.

Luke Besaw, Lead Immersion Instructor, said the recertification process measures their language fluency to continue teaching Menominee students.

Besaw said the students are tested

in a verbal portion where they will have a conversation with MLC members; present a visual lesson plan and a Menominee history test.

“It’s a refresher and a way for us to keep an eye on quality control, to see where their strengths and weaknesses are in their language skills,” Besaw said.

See **MLCC** pg.



MLCC

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Joey Awonohopay, Director of Menominee Language and Culture, thanked elder tribal speakers who have laid the foundations for the present language speaking program and acknowledged the challenges that the current language instructors endure to be better teachers to Menominee youths beginning to learn the language.

"I see the struggles first hand you have in the classroom and want to say 'Maac Waae waaen' to your families that support you. That support from home is a huge part of what you do here," he said.

"Everybody sees what you do, the things that you're trying to do. The support is always there. It might not seem like it's always verbally there for you but there is so much support that's there to help lift you up, especially during the tough times during the school year."

At 22, Adrienne Tucker was among the youngest to have

received her recertification. Tucker's language journey began when she was a Kindergarten student. She began her journey as a Menominee language instructor last January and now teaches at the Menominee Early Childhood Services at the Delores K. Boyd Center, teaching children of all ages at the center.

"Ever since I was young I knew it was a dream of mine to become a Menominee language teacher. Once they started this immersion program it got my attention right away and I wanted to be a part of it," she said.

"I remember hearing back in middle school that our language is endangered, that was one of the biggest factors that motivates me even more. Knowing that it's a part of me and that it could disappear one day really scared me. I'm confident that our language is coming back. There are so many people that are on the same language journey.

Whether they're a part of this immersion program or MenominyOU, it's very encouraging and motivating to see so many in our community, even people that aren't on the reservation, still learning the language so I feel good about where we're at."

The language instructors awarded recertification:

- Randi Chevalier - Keshena Primary School
- Kylene O'Reilly - Menominee Indian High School
- Shawna Sanapaw - Menominee Tribal School
- Robert Tourlillot, Kara Besaw - Kaahkēnawapahāteq Immersion School
- Justine Pyawasay, Tashina Guzman, Celine Martin, Alexandria Corn, Adrienne Tucker, Jaycee Tourlillot, Tennille Lyons - Early Childhood Services