



# Spirit Speakers

Our Languages, Our Future

October 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> 2020

## Recommendations Report





## Acknowledgements

The Assembly of First Nations and Indigenuity Consulting Group acknowledge the ancestral and unceded territories on which the participants of this virtual forum were located. We also raise our hands and thank all the First Nations youth from across Turtle Island who shared their stories, challenges, ideas, and dreams as part of the Spirit Speakers: Our Languages, Our Future. We respect the privilege and responsibility we have to carry forward their voices as part of this report.

# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
Conference Structure and Agenda Overview	5
This Report	6
<b>Values, Goals &amp; Dreams</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Challenges</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Supports &amp; Successes</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>13</b>
Funding and Infrastructure	14
Lifelong Learning	15
Mainstream Media Representation, Communication & Partnerships	16
Supports for Different Styles of Teaching/Learning/Accessibility	17
Healing	18
<b>Comments from Leadership</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Conclusion and Closing Remarks</b>	<b>20</b>
Participant Reflection Videos	21
Forum Summary Videos	22



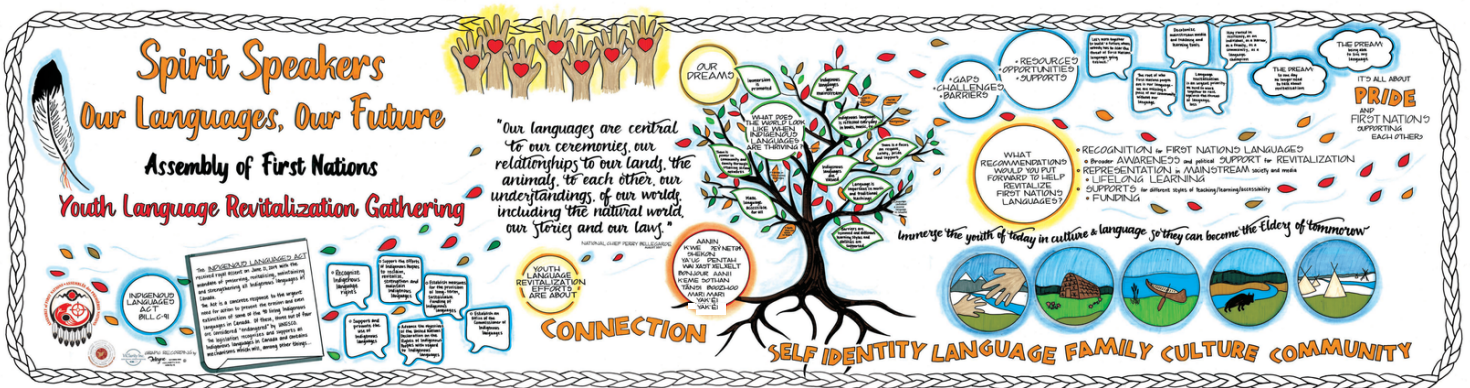
# Introduction

On October 17 and 18, 2020, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) hosted a virtual forum with First Nations youth from across the country to talk about First Nations language revitalization. A total of 22 youth, aged 14-24, participated in the forum from across Canada (including British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland, and the Yukon).

The forum, titled “Spirit Speakers: Our Languages, Our Future” provided a space for youth to connect and discuss their experiences with speaking, learning, and teaching their language. Goals, challenges, and success stories were shared, and recommendations aimed at increasing access to language and improving overall language proficiency were put forward.

The event was originally planned to be held in person in Ottawa in March 2020. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this was postponed. In order to engage the youth in a safe and respectful environment, the AFN made the decision to reschedule the event using a virtual platform (Zoom). The forum was facilitated by Indigenuity Consulting Group Inc., an Indigenous-owned company based in British Columbia.

An opening statement was provided by National Chief Perry Bellegarde. Elder Siyamiyateliyot Elizabeth Phillips opened the conference by addressing the youth in Halq'eméylem. AFN Resident Knowledge Keeper Mike Kanentakeron Mitchell attended the forum as an observer and advisor and spoke to the youth on both days providing insights, as well as a Thanksgiving Address and closing prayers in Kanien'kéha. The event also included a keynote address by Kalila George-Wilson from the Tsleil Waututh Nation, where she shared her experience learning and teaching four Salish dialects.



A graphic recording of the conference highlights the values, dreams, challenges and recommendations shared by the youth participants. Click the image to open a larger version.





## Conference Structure and Agenda Overview

Prior to the conference, youth were assigned breakout groups to ensure there was diversity of language experience and regional representation in each of the three groups. Each youth was asked to provide a picture of something that represented their connection to language and culture, and these photos were shared within the breakout groups as part of the youth's introductions to their peers.



*Elder Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell providing a welcome to the youth.*

After the openings, introductions, and keynote speaker, the AFN Languages and Culture Sector Acting Director, Julia Stockdale-Otárola, shared introductions and acknowledgements and provided a brief presentation on the work the Sector is currently undertaking. Guest speaker Kalila George-Wilson spoke about her experience both teaching and learning First Nations languages, mentorship, education methods, and ways to engage in language and culture sharing with other communities. Next, youth worked together in their breakout sessions to discuss the presentation and some of the new ideas it has sparked, and then worked in their groups on a 'Values and Dreams'

exercise. At the end of the day, youth rejoined the plenary sessions, reported on their discussions, and were given an optional homework assignment to prepare for discussions on day two.

After the opening on day two, youth worked in their breakout groups to discuss Challenges, Gaps, Opportunities, as well as Resources and Supports, and finally Recommendations. After these sessions, they once again rejoined in plenary and spokespeople for each group reported out on their work to their peers. The participants had an opportunity to discuss their ideas and identify common points between the breakout groups. At the end of the day, Director General Paul Pelletier from the Department of Canadian Heritage, Indigenous Languages Branch joined, and youth presented their recommendations and a summary of their 'Values and Dreams' exercise. The Director General then shared his reflections on the session and some information on the government's current work to support Indigenous languages. There was then opportunity for a question and answer session. The day was wrapped up by discussing next steps, having a closing circle for youth to provide comments, and having a closing prayer by AFN Resident Elder/Knowledge Keeper Mike Kanentakeron Mitchell.



*Guest speaker Kalila George-Wilson addressing participants.*

## This Report

This report summarizes the youth's comments and discussions during the forum, as well as homework and post conference comments, and is organized into four main sections:

- Values, Goals and Dreams;
- Challenges;
- Supports and Successes; and,
- Recommendations

The information in each section is intended to reflect the input that the youth attendees generously provided over the two-day forum, with as little editing as possible included in each point. Input has been grouped into broad categories and summarized for ease of review, but the substance of the information originates from the youth, not from any outside sources or qualification of specific points. Comments received are not attributed to individual participants.

# Values, Goals & Dreams

Youth delegates were asked at the start of the forum to share their values, goals, and dreams on language revitalization.

Discussions on this topic were highly engaging, and the youth offered a number of insights, personal experiences, and shared values with respect to language revitalization. One of the most common sentiments expressed was that language and culture are intricately connected and you “can’t really have one without the other”. Youth also stressed the importance of recognizing the value of First Nations languages and said that languages need to be embedded in ‘mainstream’ culture through various means (e.g. on signs, in the media, in songs, in shows and films, on cereal boxes, place names, among others).


Youth also stated that the revitalization of languages needs to be community-driven and that leaders need to play an active role in supporting languages, including increasing fluency. Some youth spoke about the fact that many of their peers ‘feel embarrassed’ speaking their language. They expressed that it would be helpful if pride was instilled from leaders and the community in order to overcome this. Several youths spoke of their dream to live in a community where there are fluent speakers of all ages. Many participants expressed that one goal would be for youth to be able to speak their own language as much as they are able to speak colonial languages.

The importance of Elders and Knowledge Keepers and the role they play in sharing the language was also emphasized. Some youth referred to ‘silent speakers’ – Elders shamed into not speaking their language through their experiences in residential schools – and said communities and broader society need to support those Elders.

Reclaiming your  
language can bring  
healing and help  
reconnect you to your  
culture.

The following are some additional words and phrases that youth shared to best describe what language means to them, and the values they associate with language revitalization:


- patience and perseverance;
- reconciliation and healing;
- respect;
- language preservation and protection;
- identity;
- resilience;
- history;
- community support and integration of knowledge from Elders;
- validation; and,
- pride.



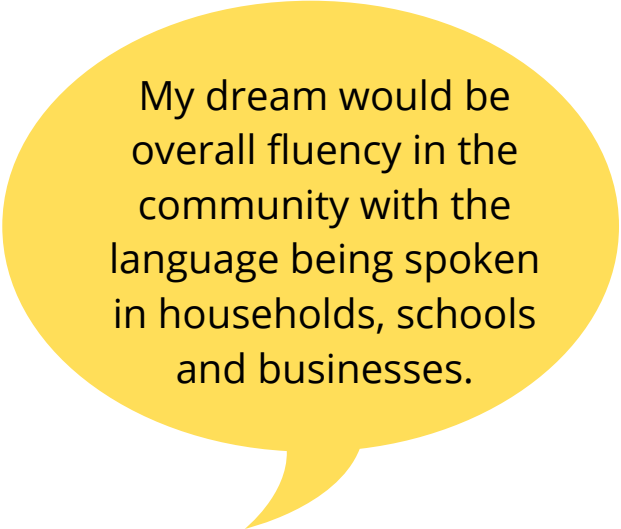
We need to  
'make it cool' to  
speak the  
language.

When asked to share what the world would look like if First Nations languages were flourishing, youth said there would be reconciliation and healing. They shared that youth would be able to understand Elders when they share their stories in their language, and people would have pride in speaking their language. Youth want to see their language expressed and embraced by the broader public. If First Nations languages were flourishing, youth feel that culture would be respected, communities would be supportive of each other, funding would be consistent, and language teachers would be valued and recognized.

Youth also said that in an ideal world, languages would be integrated into the school system and valued to the same extent as colonial languages. There would be fluent speakers from birth through all ages of life. Teaching programs and classes would be available that were accessible to everyone and met the needs of a variety of different learners (e.g. land-based learning, learning through activity, game-based learning).



We express ourselves,  
our beliefs and our  
worldviews using our  
language and cultural  
teachings. They go hand in  
hand with each other.



My dream would be  
overall fluency in the  
community with the  
language being spoken  
in households, schools  
and businesses.

# Challenges

Youth shared that there are several existing challenges and barriers that prevent them from reaching their language goals. They spoke about a lack of resources (funding, teachers, infrastructure, classes, and supports), insufficient community supports (lack of leadership, awareness, and commitment), and the fact that there is no consistent application of teaching (e.g. courses available only to younger grades, or not to adults, varied curricula, among others). There was also discussion about some of the emotional aspects that youth struggle with when trying to learn their language (feeling embarrassed, ashamed, or not supported).

The following list provides further details on these challenges:

## Lack of Resources

Although the level of resources available varies across the country, and in some cases quite significantly (for example, in the Yukon some youth reported there were some well-established resources available, whereas in places like Newfoundland, youth said there were virtually no supports), almost all participants said there were not enough resources available to enable them to reach their language acquisition goals. These included:

- lack of consistent, reliable, adequate funding;
- no access to audio or written recordings, including no phonetic resources;
- limited or no classes for different levels of speakers;
- poverty and lack of supports available to youth to access language programming (e.g. tuition, transportation, living, childcare costs);
- lack of access to reliable internet;
- no dedicated physical space or buildings for teaching;
- no dedicated location for cultural activities;
- lack of fluent speakers: Elders are passing away or getting over-worked;
- lack of qualified teachers, insufficient compensation for teachers; and,
- lack of resources available off-reserve.



## Community Challenges

Many youths spoke about gaps in community support, ranging from lack of speakers, mentors, and leaders, to not enough commitment/motivation to build proficiency.

Other community challenges noted were:

- lack of support for community programs or policies that facilitate language learning or training for employees as a form of recognized upskilling (during work hours);
- need for greater mobilization and support to learn the language; and,
- lack of awareness about opportunities.

## Lack of Continuity

A number of youths said one of the main challenges they face is that there is no continuity in the lessons they can access at different ages. Many said there are courses offered from Kindergarten to Grade 7, for example, but courses then drop off and potential speakers are lost. Several youths also said it is even more difficult to learn the language when it is not spoken at home or heard in the community in general. Some also commented that parents often decide to enroll students in French or other colonial language classes in school due to a perception that this would be more useful.

## Emotional Considerations

Although the youth who attended the forum were clearly dedicated to learning and speaking their languages, they did say that it is common for youth to 'be embarrassed' about speaking their language, or feel like it 'isn't cool' to try too hard to learn the language. Many said that if other youth are not interested in learning the language, then that can deter others from learning and even make them feel ashamed.

I don't hear it anywhere, I don't see it anywhere, and it makes it really difficult for me to learn as an adult.

It almost feels like I'm showing off by being able to speak my language when many others weren't allowed, and feeling shame about that.



# Supports & Successes

The youth participants talked about the supports they have found helpful in learning their language. They also shared some success stories they have experienced in their communities. There was overall agreement that sharing information with each other was invaluable and that more opportunities to learn from each other was necessary.

The following are the supports that youth said helped them in their journey to learning their language:

- listening to Elders speak and pray;
- participating in cultural activities where the language is spoken (singing, hand drum songs, ceremonies, storytelling lunches);
- having access to technology such as Zoom, Quizlet, and learning apps;
- game-based and land-based learning;
- supportive communities and families;
- dedicated teachers;
- language challenges that offer prizes;
- audio recordings;
- mandatory language classes; and,
- access to outdoor learning with languages.

Some participants were able to share specific examples of success from their community or region.

- Saskatoon Public School District has a Traditional Knowledge Learning program for all of their elementary and secondary schools, and five Indigenous languages (Cree, Dakota, Nakoda, Dene & Michif) are taught through an online platform.
- In the Yukon, the Southern Tutchone Nations have worked to create a language learning app for their language that is free and accessible to anybody who has access to the internet.
- Akwesasne has four schools where core classes are taught in Mohawk. The Akwesasne Freedom School has full language immersion from pre-kindergarten to Grade 9. The Akwesasne core program offers CDs and activities for students to learn at their own pace.

- Nipissing offers weekly language classes where students can work on language worksheets and have conversations with speakers and Elders. Traditional activities are sometimes taught in the language through storytelling.
- The Yukon Native Language Centre offers a range of language resources free for Yukon First Nations, including recordings, books, dictionaries, among others. It also offers shared online resources/apps for coastal Tlingit relatives from Alaska, as well as different education/training opportunities across the territory (e.g. Simon Fraser University Indigenous Language Proficiency certificate, University of Alaska Southeast online Tlingit language classes and minor).
- Some northern First Nations are recording Elders as they tell stories in either English or Kaska and then transcribing those stories – these are then posted online with a translation.
- An ‘Anishinaabemowin Speaking Challenge’ is being offered in (at least) one First Nation as reported by an attendee. As part of this challenge, students get 4 to 6 months to practice and then participate – during COVID-19 this is being done through weekly Zoom meetings and by using Quizlet.
- One participant spoke about the fact that their First Nation has developed an app to learn Cree and instituted immersion for children up to Grade 3 in schools on-reserve.

Other helpful initiatives that were noted by youth were:

- Weekly language lunches (where lunch is free if you speak the language) and weekly storytelling sessions;
- Flashcards app where people can record themselves and post words and share with others;
- Financial incentives for Band office employees to speak the language at work;
- Recording short language videos and posting online (for example, on Facebook and Vimeo);
- Developing a ‘best practices hub’ that includes best practices, stories, podcasts, and videos from around the country and the world; and,
- Learning from First Nations that are further ahead in their language revitalization journey can be helpful in learning what approaches work well and what steps to take to accomplish certain goals.

It has to be a community-driven goal to work on languages. It takes a community.



## Funding and Infrastructure

1

**Ensure teacher education, training, and compensation are properly resourced and equitable with other teaching positions.**

- Ensure Elders receive adequate compensation for their work.
- Create full-time language teacher positions.
- Increase the amount of paid youth positions for language-based employment.

2

**Provide reliable, consistent, and flexible funding that allows First Nations led language initiatives to make their own spending decisions.**

- Dedicate a budget for First Nations student scholarships and bursaries for language revitalization. Provide funding for non-First Nations learners to engage in and support language revitalization.
- Provide resources for language camps and land-based learning.
- Provide funding to help ensure all basic needs of learners are met, including child-care needs.
- Provide funding for complementary activities and skills such as grant writing and grass roots programming.

3

**Build infrastructure such as schools and youth centres on and off reserve, including in urban areas, so there is a dedicated space to learn languages.**

- Create opportunities for youth to be employed/host learning activities and workshops for their peers and community members.

Community learning has unique feeling that is different than individual learning because you can cheer on others as you work together.

## Lifelong Learning

4

**Start programs in early childhood and offer them consistently throughout all stages of life, using a womb to grave approach.**

- Make it mandatory to learn an Indigenous language in school where possible.
- Develop language nests.
- Create programs focused specifically on different life/family stages (family camp, single learning, couples' immersion, Two-Spirit retreats).

5

**Develop programs that link intergenerational learning.**

- Create Elder-youth mentorship (mentor-apprentice) programs, where Elders would provide help in accessing resources and opportunities.
- Provide support for "Silent Speakers" – pair up silent speaker Elders with other community or family members who can speak the language.

The biggest supports are having adults engaged in learning their language. Since they are older I think it's important they are being good role models for the younger kids. I feel the youth will feel more obligated and/or motivated to want to learn if the adults are making that extra effort on learning.

## Mainstream Media Representation, Communication and Partnerships

6

**Work to increase the presence of First Nations languages in the 'mainstream culture' and social media.**

- Create First Nations language-based channels such as newsletters, websites, board games, books, signs, land acknowledgements, among others. For languages that have a written orthography, create publications in those languages (children's books, comics, dictionaries, memes, etc.).
- Create programs such as a "Tik Tok Language Competition", telling stories in First Nations languages over Facebook live and similar mediums.

7

**Recognize First Nations languages as official languages across Canada, like in the Northwest Territories or even nationally.**

We need to start seeing see our languages everywhere – on labels, signs, doorways, newsletters, cereal boxes, etc. We need to make the language 'cool'.

8

**Develop partnerships with universities and colleges.**

- Provide accreditation for First Nations languages in colleges and universities.

9

**Maintain connections between youth across the country.**

- Establish Youth Councils and 'Youth Ambassadors' across First Nations that can provide a support system for networking and learning.
- Host additional youth language revitalization meetings and large group forums, like this event.



## Supports for Different Styles of Teaching/Learning/Accessibility

10

**Provide funding for experiential learning programs that combine western and traditional knowledge and incorporate activities and body movements into learning.**

- Have programs that allow for activities such as berry-picking, drum-making, painting, medicinal gathering while immersed in language.
- Incorporate 'total physical response' (TPR) learning into the system.
- Create programs that incorporate art and culture with language learning, similar to artist-in-residency programs.
- Have language teachers include American Sign Language (ASL) in their teachings simultaneously while speaking.

I think the tools we need to help revitalize the language is a very advanced app that can help out native people learn our different native languages and dialects. It would be amazing to see a Siri type of program that can help with pronunciation.

11

**Make versatile technology available for all learners.**

- Ensure there are accessible resources for people with disabilities to be able to access language courses.
- Offer self-paced learning options, both online and in-person.
- Develop programs that will allow off-reserve members to engage in language learning, through remote platforms and other resources.
- Utilize innovative technologies, such as 'leapfrog tablet', apps, online games, websites like Kahoot and Quizlet, 'Native Duolingo'.

# Healing

12

Integrate language into healing programs and initiatives, such as those developed for residential school survivors, related to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, among others. Where possible, use traditional healing and medicines.

13

Build more cultural treatment centres for youth that include rebuilding their connection to culture and language.



*A number of participants sharing their experiences with the facilitators.*

## Comments From Leadership

In his opening comments to the youth, National Chief Bellegarde spoke about the importance of First Nations language, noting it was vital for the right to self-determination to be recognized nationally and internationally. He stated that the work regarding the Indigenous Languages Act is not yet done, and that “we need First Nations voices, especially those of our youth in the implementation of this Act”. National Chief Bellegarde concluded his comments and shared that he was inspired by the youth’s commitment to our languages. He further committed to continuing to advocate to the Government that First Nations language revitalization and fluency remain a top priority.

At the end of the event Paul Pelletier, the Director General of the Indigenous Languages Branch at the Department of Canadian Heritage, joined the event to listen to the youth present their discussions and group recommendations. Mr. Pelletier stated that what he heard from the youth was impressive and was some of the strongest work he has heard regarding Indigenous language revitalization to date. He also shared information on the consultations on the implementation of the *Indigenous Languages Act*. He further explained that the consultations were organized to discuss the development of a new Indigenous Languages Funding Model (ILFM) and support the appointment process and establishment of the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages (OCIL).

Mr. Pelletier also shared information about the Have Your Say webpage where youth could share additional comments on the consultation topics and offered to be available to any youth that wanted to participate in the consultations.

AFN Resident Elder/Knowledge Keeper Mike Kanentakeron Mitchell also provided closing remarks to the youth, reflecting and recognizing the hard and important work that the AFN and National Chief Bellegarde have done in regards to language and culture revitalization. He thanked the youth for participating on a weekend and for bringing their inspiring commitment to language to this work, then closed the event with a prayer.

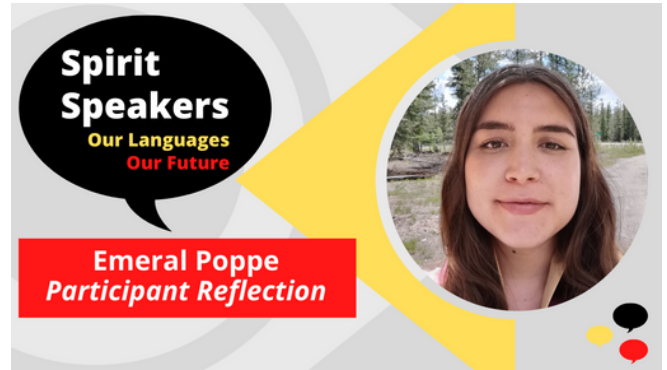
## Conclusion & Closing Remarks

During the closing remarks, youth were given an opportunity to share reflections on the event, to talk about what inspired them, and to talk about the language revitalization work they would like to undertake moving forward. Attendees were also given an opportunity to participate in a survey and interviews after the event ended to share further reflections. All of the feedback was combined, and some of the youth thoughts are as follows:

- Youth are inspired by hearing from their peers, and there is power in sharing success with each other.
- It is most impactful when sharing stories between youth, as it allows you to feel like you can also achieve similar things and reach the same points of success.
- Some participants shared that they wanted to take ideas of other programs they learned about to implement new language revitalization activities in their communities.
- When youth work together, they all bring different pieces of the puzzle, and it is through working together that the language revitalization picture can be completed.
- Participants were excited to see how their recommendations may be implemented in the future.
- Youth felt energized and inspired by sharing and learning together.
- There was a strong indication that youth wanted to stay connected, with many sharing they would like to see another AFN conference like this take place. Others suggested they connect through social media or other platforms to continue to share and inspire one another.
- The conference was an inspiration for some youth to go home, and to work even harder on language revitalization.
- Many youth expressed that they hope that more youth conferences focused on languages will take place in the future to help maintain the connections they build and be involved in revitalization work.

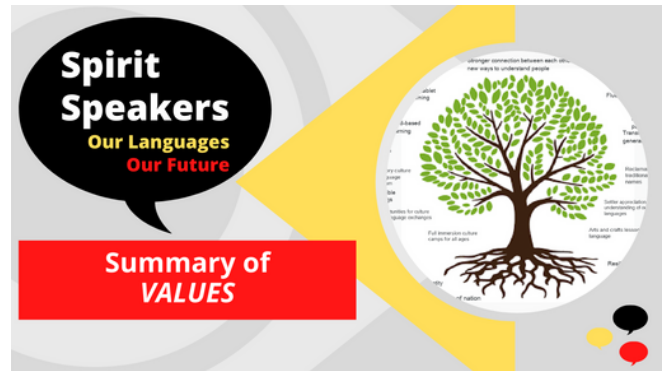
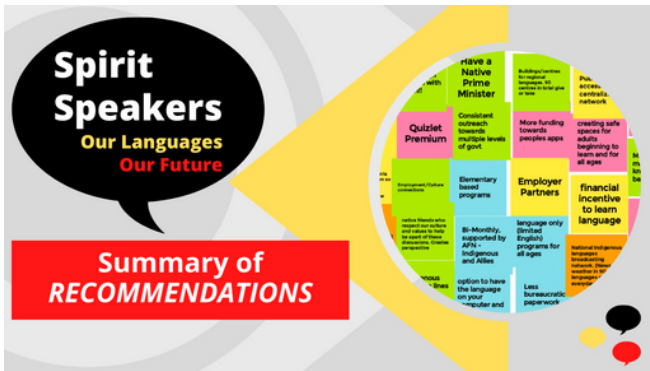
# Participant Reflection Videos

Click on the thumbnails below to watch brief reflection videos provided by the youth:



# Forum Summary Videos

Click on the thumbnails below to watch short videos of the participants providing a summary of the recommendations and the values. Additionally, view a segment from Kalila George-Wilson's presentation, and observations shared by Director General Paul Pelletier, Department of Canadian Heritage, Indigenous Languages Branch.







**Spirit  
Speakers**

**Our Languages**

**Our Future**