

Testimony of Mary Kim Titla
San Carlos Unified School District Communication's Officer
&
Board Member for the National Indian Education Association
Before the
Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
Oversight Hearing on
Reclaiming our Image and Identity for the next Seven Generations
November 29, 2012

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Akaka, Vice-Chairman Barrasso, and Members of the Committee:

Dagot'ee. Thank you all for the work you do on behalf of Native people and thank you for this opportunity to address you about the future of our people. My name is Mary Kim Titla. I'm a member of the San Carlos Apache Tribe in Arizona. I was born and raised on the San Carlos Apache reservation. Currently I work as the Communications Officer for the San Carlos Unified School District. Last year, thanks to the iLead program at Arizona State University, I had the privilege of interning as Principal at San Carlos Secondary School where I learned first-hand the challenges facing educators. I'm also a freelance writer and former TV News Reporter. I serve as Secretary for the Board of Trustees for United National Indian Tribal Youth, Inc. I'm a board member for the National Indian Education Association and a Co-Lead Advisor for the San Carlos Apache Youth Council. I'm a proud descendant of three Apache chiefs, an Apache Scout, military veterans, a former tribal councilwoman and a Master wood carver and schoolteacher.

EMBRACING IDENTITY

How can we, as Native people, reclaim our image and identity for the next Seven Generations? First, our Native children must fully embrace who they are. An estimated 93 percent of Native children attend both urban and rural public schools. The remaining 7 percent attend Bureau of Indian Education schools. I'd like to share some alarming statistics.

According to the 2011 National Indian Education Study, which involved a survey of Native students in 12 states, including my great state of Arizona, only 44 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native fourth-graders reported knowing a little or nothing of their tribe or group's history. A mere 32 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native eighth graders had some knowledge of their Native history, and 32 percent had some knowledge of their Native traditions and cultures. That means two-thirds knew little or nothing of their Native history and heritage.

This lack of knowledge about their identities as members of proud and powerful cultures, along with the lack of self-pride, is devastating. It is one reason why just three out of every five of our American Indian and Alaska Native high schools graduated on time last year.

I know this all too well. My first negative experience surrounding image and identity began when I attended public school as a young child. I attended a school with non-Indian students in a nearby town. During a field trip that required traveling through my reservation, a non-Indian student pointed at an Indian home and laughed. Most Indian homes in the 1960s, including mine, did not have plumbing or electricity. The statement did not make me feel good about myself. When I was a teenager, my friends and I decided to attend a dance in another nearby town. Mostly non-Indians were at the dance. As we drove around the building, a young man shouted "Dirty Indians!" My friends reacted by shouting profanities. We drove away. Those memories are forever etched in my mind. How many Native American children today still live in situations that are embarrassing to them or are victims of racism? We must continue to work hard to educate the ignorant and put an end to racism.

World-class culturally based education is one way to help Native students reclaim their proud image and identity. It is also one of the most-important solutions to helping our children and communities succeed in a world in which knowledge is economic, social, and political power.

ACADEMIC PROGRESS

In order for our Native students to reclaim their image and identity, the federal government must do everything possible to ensure schools serving Native students meet

benchmarks for academic progress. Many of our schools serving Native students in Arizona are labeled failing schools. The failing label should be applied to a system that knew the struggles in these communities and did little to intervene in a meaningful way until President Barack Obama took office. It is the label that should be applied to the level of helpful educational research related to American Indians on reservations.

We must work together to ensure our students stay in school and ensure our graduates are equipped with 21st Century skills. This includes keeping pace with technological infrastructure to support e-learning initiatives. The intent of the 2011 National Indian Education Study was to address issues, specifically those related to identifying practices and methods that raise the academic achievement of American Indian/Alaska Native students, and assessing the role of Native language and culture in fostering that improvement. Recently, an Apache language coordinator in our school district, after conducting an assessment, informed me that only one student out of more than 900 students in our elementary school can speak Apache fluently. A 2007 survey of San Carlos Apaches shows less than 20 percent of more than 14,000 tribal members are fluent Apache speakers. Our language is not to the point of extinction but at this rate, it's just a matter of time.

Native education is in a state of emergency. Many elders believe our language is the glue that holds our culture together. Many believe without our language, we will no longer be Apache. We will no longer be Indian. Fortunately, we have Apache language teachers who are working very hard to make sure our language never dies but there are too few language teachers and the pressure to do No Child Left Behind academics is effectively minimizing the language and the arts.

ROLE OF COMMUNITY

Parents of course play a very important role in helping their children with self-image and identity. My parents are the driving force behind my desire to prove myself to the world. My parents, Phillip and Charlotte Titla, raised me to do my best in school and to aim for the stars. They said education is the key to success and the key to breaking the cycle of poverty and alcoholism. They stressed “when you go to college” not “if you go to college.” Growing up, I was the exception rather than the norm. All five of the Titla

children graduated from college, with three obtaining Master's degrees but that's not the best part of the story. The best part of the story is my parents quit their jobs and graduated with my youngest brother from Grand Canyon University. My mother went on to become a social worker. My father and brother became schoolteachers. That was more than 20 years ago when only a handful of Apache teachers worked for our school district. Today 15 Apache teachers work in our school district and another 10 Apaches will be certified to teach next month through the iTeach program at Arizona State University. Six Apaches are part of the district leadership team. San Carlos Apaches are taking ownership of their schools in a big way.

In order for our children to truly reclaim their image and identity, tribes, parents and community members must have a say in shaping and controlling what their children learn in school. Earlier this year, our school district received unprecedented support from the San Carlos Apache Tribal Council who provided incentives for students who passed the AIMS (Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards) test. More importantly, tribal leaders are giving their time and are talking personally with students at the schools.

NATIVE ~~NATIVE~~ CLASS ACT

Indian Country needs strong, concerted, and sustained support to pass the Native CLASS (Culture, Language and Access for Success in Schools) Act in Congress. While not a fix-all, the Native CLASS Act does address many of the systemic problems in Native education and includes strengthening tribal control of education, preserves and revitalizes Native languages and encourages tribal/state partnerships.

TRUST RESPONSIBILITY

We must also reaffirm and acknowledge the Department of Education's federal trust responsibility for American Indian and Alaska Native students. The President issued his memorandum on Executive Order 13175, Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments, in 2009. The Department of Education has yet to release its consultation policy. As a result, tribes are still struggling to be at the table—both with the Department of Education and States—in developing meaningful education policy for

Native students. The Department must ensure that tribes are key stakeholders and that it consults with tribes prior to the development of regulations that will affect how Native students and schools are funded. We desperately need increased funding for Title VII Indian Education, and full funding for Title I and Impact Aid.

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

While my testimony today focuses on Indian education, I'd also like to take this opportunity to stand with employees and visitors at the Ariel Rios Federal Building, the Society of American Indian Government Employees (SAIGE) and the National Congress of American Indians, who have raised objections over six historical murals that are considered offensive and stereotype Native Americans. The old western images are located in elevator lobbies on upper floors and are visible to employees and visitors. While consultation has occurred and a recommendation made to leave the murals in place with interpretative panels, I join with those who protest the images, on behalf of Native children, and ask that they be removed as they create a hostile work environment. It's important to teach the next seven generations to stand up for what is right.

CONCLUSION

We are rapidly moving through the 21st Century. Our children do not know or comprehend what it means to be American Indian in this modern age. We must work together with the support of lawmakers if our next seven generations are to reclaim their heritage and capture the vision of American Indians in the 22nd Century. I have a vested interest. I'm the mother of an 11th grader and the grandmother of three grandchildren who are counting on me to take a stand on Indian education issues. Today, I take this stand for them and for all Native children. Ahiyé! Thank you and God bless you!