

**TESTIMONY OF MARIAH BOWERS
REGARDING THE
BENIFTS OF
CULTURALLY BASED EDUCATION
FOR NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS**

JUNE 17, 2010

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon Chairman Dorgan and members of the committee. My name is Mariah Bowers. I am 19 years old and a college sophomore at Southern Oregon University. I am an Alaska Native and was adopted into a Yurok family when I was a baby. Thank you for inviting me to testify about my experience as a Native American student in the era of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Between kindergarten and my freshman year of high school I attended public schools in Oregon, where I never did well in school. However, that changed when I transferred to the Klamath River Early College of the Redwoods Charter School (KRECRC), a culture based charter school operated by the Yurok tribe and community, located on the Yurok Reservation in Northern California. At KRECRC I thrived, and I am now a successful college sophomore ultimately because of the education I received there. Today I will discuss my experiences in public and charter schools. I will also make recommendations about how we can improve the educational process of Native American students.

A. Public School

During my freshman year of high school I started having problems in school. At that time, I lived with my family in a rural area outside of Eugene, Oregon where I attended Churchill High School. Every morning I had to catch the school bus at 7 a.m. to be on time for 8 a.m. classes. My class schedule was divided into blue and white days; on blue days I had math, reading, humanities, and science, and on white days I had art, PE, and a free period. I had perfect attendance and always did my homework for all my classes. But as the year progressed, I began to not understand the material in the hard classes, like math, and science. I would ask questions during class, I spent time studying, but I still struggled with the material. Also, I felt isolated, like I was the only student who didn't understand the material. My teachers weren't very helpful. They refused to meet with me and barely knew who I was. I asked them about my grades but they didn't know what I had in the class. They didn't seem interested in my success as a student.

By the end of mid-terms I was on the verge of flunking out of school. I did not perform well on my mid terms exams. Again, I tried to arrange meetings with my teachers to figure out why I was struggling, but they didn't have time and wouldn't meet

with me. Instead, they told me to do extra credit to pass their classes. I did the extra credit, which improved my grades to Cs, but I still didn't understand the material.

Reflecting back I realize that part of the problem was I didn't understand what was going to be on the tests. Even though I did the homework and went to class, I didn't know what I was expected to learn or what I was going to be tested on. Nobody told me! It was never clear to me what I was expected to know. I grew more and more frustrated because even though I went to class and did the work – I still didn't perform well on the tests. I became more anxious and nervous about my classes and going to school. The teachers seemed more concerned about “teaching to the tests” and getting through all of the curriculum that would be on the test as opposed to actually teaching the students and making sure the students understood the material.

By the middle of my freshman year, I understood less and less of the material and my grades began to suffer even more. I stopped going to school on the hard days because I was too nervous and anxious and I felt isolated. With extra time on my hands, I started getting into trouble and hanging out with other kids who weren't going to school. My mom got very concerned and pulled me out of school. Since most of our family lives on the Yurok Reservation in Northern California they suggested I try going to the Klamath River Early College of the Redwoods Charter School (KRECRC) located on the Yurok Reservation that focuses on Yurok culture and language as the foundation to learn other subjects. My family suggested I just try it on a temporary basis to see if I liked it better than public school. So I temporarily moved to the Yurok Reservation to attend the school.

B. Charter School

I loved going to school at KRECRC and I ended up graduating from the school three years later. The school is attended by Yuroks, non-natives, and Native Americans from other tribes. It has grades 9 through 12 and has a partnership with the Early College of the Redwoods to enable students to graduate with AA degrees. It uses Yurok language and culture as the foundation to teach all subjects. The class sizes range from 12 to 20 students. I did well at this school, finally! Honestly, if it wasn't for this school, the teachers, staff, elders, and students, I wouldn't be in College today.

1. Standards, Teachers, and Elders

The biggest differences between the public school and KRECRC were how I was tested and how I was taught. First, the testing standards were completely different. At KRECRC test standards were described in a book that was given to each student. Students could obtain “proficient,” “emerging” or “advance” as grades. The book laid out what type of student product was required for each grade. This worked well for me because I knew exactly what I had to do to get an advanced grade. I understood what was expected of me and I never had to guess like I did in the public school. The teachers gave me materials to master, the testing standards were clear, and I knew what I needed to do to get good grades. This made me more accountable – I knew what I had to do to get a good grade. In the public school, I didn't know what was expected and I didn't know

what was going to be tested, so it was hard for me to get good grades. But at KRECRC, I knew exactly what to expect and how to perform well on tests.

The curriculum used to meet the academic standards required the same amount of work as I had done in the public school and it was just as academically challenging; only now I knew what was expected of me. The curriculum was also interesting because we learned math, science, history, and reading in a way that related to my life. For example, we learned the history of the Yurok people and we learned about the ecosystems on the Yurok Reservation and how they supported traditional foods that I had grown up eating, such as salmon and acorns.

The teachers also worked with me to determine how I was going to meet the academic standards. This worked well because I knew what I needed to do to get good grades. The teachers were very involved in my classes and were very accessible. They always knew what my grades were and how I was progressing. They also knew the areas where I was struggling and offered extra instruction. They were kind and understanding. They knew who I was and were willing to work with me. This helped me feel less nervous about the hard subjects. It helped me feel like I could learn.

Also at KRECRC, in every classroom an elder from the community would sit in the class. The elders were community members or sometimes students' family members. They didn't teach but were there to "sit in." The elders helped the students behave because no one wanted to get in trouble in front of the elders. Most of the students understood that the elders came in from town to spend time with the students and they were community leaders – both demanded respect so the kids paid attention to the teachers and were polite. The presence of elders controlled behavior – even when the elders feel asleep in class, proving that geometry is boring at any age!

2. Culture

Yurok language and culture was part of every day at KRECRC. We went to school to become contributing members of the Yurok community. Learning our culture became an incentive for me and other students to come to school.

The school offers Yurok language classes which is how I learned how to introduce myself in Yurok. We learned Yurok songs and made flash cards to learn vocabulary. Yurok culture is taught in each class, but specifically, every Wednesday afternoon we did a cultural activity. Students looked forward to this throughout the entire week. For the culture activity, boys and girls are separated into groups and community leaders and elders taught each group.

On my first culture day, we started the process of making Indian baskets. The Tribal Fisheries Department took us up the Klamath River to pick the roots and plants required to make baskets. We spent the day picking the roots and plants and preparing them to make baskets. The next week a community leader came to the school to teach us girls how to make an Indian basket.

Meanwhile the boys were learning how to make eel hooks to catch eels, a very popular traditional food, and later they went “eeling.” After the boys caught the eels, the elders taught us girls how to prepare them and we cooked the eels for the school lunch. The following month the boys learned how to make a canoe. Every one loves these activities because we learn how to be Yuroks.

Also, the school uses the Yurok process of “settling up” to resolve disputes between students, teachers, and administrators. “Settling up” requires the people who are in the argument to meet with a neutral third party, discuss and determine who is in the wrong, and that person has to pay the injured party. After the payment is made, the parties can’t hold grudges or speak of the event again. The school uses this process to resolve all disputes that may arise, from student-to-student bad mouthing to student-to-teacher behavioral problems. The process has been very effective in managing student behavior. The students respect this process because the community has used it for several generations.

Usually, in the public school that serves the Yurok Reservation, students are suspended if they get in a fight with a student or teacher. If you get suspended, you have free time, and in most cases, kids will start drinking or doing drugs and a lot of times you get in trouble with the law before you make it back to school. The public school offers no guidance about how a student should behave. Instead they just push you through the system. As a result, kids feel unattached to the school and they don’t learn there.

In contrast, the settling up process allows kids to stay in school and it makes them accountable for their actions – they have to pay if they harmed someone and they have to talk with that person about why they did something harmful. It also provides guidance about how a person should behave.

3. Tribal Control

At KRECRC we also met our tribal leaders. The Yurok Tribal Council helped find internships with the Tribe and local businesses. They helped us develop résumés and served as references for jobs. We were able to use the Tribe’s facilities and technology for school activities. The Tribal newspaper frequently reported about the school’s activities and accomplishments. It was good for us to have a relationship with our political leaders because they are our role models; it gave us something to work toward.

After a few weeks of school at KRECRC I understood why school is so important; through all of these activities I learned standards for life – not just math or science class or standardized tests as was my experience in public school– I learned how to be a Yurok. I learned how to be a good friend, student, and professional. Learning about my culture gave me, and the other students, something to believe in and something to do. There are a lot of drugs and alcohol on the Yurok Reservation. The Reservation is rural and most kids live in poverty so there aren’t many activities available. Sometimes kids turn to drugs and alcohol because they have nothing better to do. But we are proud of our

culture and traditions and we want to learn more about it. The school taught us who we are and to be proud of our heritage and culture. We identify with our culture. Teaching culture in the school and involving the community gave us a reason to go to school; to learn how to be Yurok.

I did very well at KRECRC. My grades went up and I learned a lot about who I am, my community and traditional academics. I graduated from KRECRC in June of 2009. I got a diversity scholarship to Southern Oregon University, where I am currently a sophomore.

C. Recommendations

I was lucky. I have a family that cares about me and I had access to a school that had the tools I needed to succeed. All children deserve to have a good educational experience like I had. For Native American students a good education means they grow up understanding who they are, where they are from, and how to be successful in college and as professionals.

Based on my experiences I recommend the Committee do four things in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to improve Native American education:

- **First, give students a clear understanding of academic standards.** If we are moving toward national standards, make those standards clear to students and provide the students with tools to meet those standards.
- **Second, increase the role of tribal governments and communities in education, in all schools serving tribal students.** We respect our tribal leaders and elders. We want to learn from them. Put them in our classrooms. Plus, the tribal government has resources that will help us succeed. The schools need help; they can't provide us with all the resources we need and the tribal governments working with tribal education departments/agencies can help.
- **Third, incorporate language and culture into curriculum, standards, and assessments.** In order to be ready for college or careers we have to understand where we come from and our culture. We get excited to learn about our culture. Our excitement motivates us to learn other subjects and it gives us a reason to come to school.
- **Fourth, make curriculum, standards, and tests flexible enough to provide a well rounded education that prepares Native American students to be tribal leaders, professionals, mothers, fathers, and community members.**

CONCLUSION

Thank you for allowing me to testify on these very important issues. I hope that my comments today will help the committee create a better educational experience for all Native American students.