TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
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My name is Leanne Hinton. I am a professor and chair of the Dept. of Linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley, and a founding member of the board of the Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival. I have spent my career working with Native American languages, and especially on issues and methods relating to language revitalization. I am speaking to you today in support of S. 575, the bill which allows the development and funding of "language nests" and "language survival schools" for Native American languages.

The indigenous languages of our country are fast disappearing. In my state of California alone, where at least 85 different indigenous languages were once spoken, 35 have no speakers left, and the other 50 are spoken only by a handful of elders each. Language loss is a world-wide phenomenon; indigenous peoples have been incorporated without any choice in the matter into nations whose dominant language is swamping them. It was once the policy of this government to attempt to eradicate the indigenous languages of our land, through a broad network of federally-funded boarding schools. During the first half of the 20th century, many Native Americans were taught to despise their own languages, as teachers promulgated the falsehood that indigenous languages are inherently inferior to English. Many in the general public still believe this. Yet the truth is that all languages on earth are equally capable of expressing any concept, however complex, however profound. All that may be lacking is the vocabulary for a new concept that a language has not had to speak of before; and adding new vocabulary is an easy process that is done by all languages all the time. Indeed, the English language takes on hundreds or even thousands of new words every year, through borrowing or through coinage, as science and technology come up with new inventions, or as merchants come up with new products, or as we find an intriguing new idea from another culture. (For example, English has borrowed many words from Native American languages!)

Not only are Native American languages as capable of all kinds of expression as any other language, but they are also full of rich vocabulary, grammar, idioms and metaphors, with fascinating grammatical complexities that have kept linguists engaged for many generations of research. Native American languages are also exceedingly diverse, representing many different language families -- far more than the languages of Europe. Along with their languages are being lost eloquent speech-making and story-telling skills, powerful oral literature, philosophical frameworks, environmental knowledge, and diverse world views.

Over the past several decades, however, there has been a strengthening movement on the part of indigenous peoples in America and around the world to make sure that their own original identity is not lost, even as they adapt perforce to the dominant society. Language is the center of these efforts. Governments range from severe repression of minority languages to strong support. As an example of the latter, I recently went to Finland to meet with the Saami people, whose languages are also endangered. They have created Language Nests to ensure that the children learn Saami at an early age, but once

past their preschool years, the state-funded public schools in Saami areas all have a Saami track. Families can take their choice of Finnish or Saami as the primary language of instruction. It is good to see that American language policy toward Native Americans has started to change as well, to begin to view Native American languages as a resource rather than a problem. And bills such as S. 575 shows that our government, having once tried to eradicate these languages, is now taking some of the responsibility to help Native communities revive them.

At this point our indigenous languages cannot survive without strong measures of intervention, which the indigenous communities are capable of doing themselves, but they need the support of funding and other resources, and dissemination of best practices for language revitalization. The Native American Languages Act of 1990 and 1992 have been very helpful in encouraging the revitalization of endangered languages, and many tribes can thank Congress for the support that has helped them progress in recovering their languages. Yet at the same time, other Acts, such as No Child Left Behind, can be very damaging to the survival of Native American languages, albeit by oversight. The supporters of indigenous language survival must be constantly active and proactive to keep their languages from being overlooked and severely damaged by Acts that might for other populations have postive outcomes. S. 575 is evidence of this vigilance, and of Congress's determination to correct mistakes and fully carry out U.S. Native American language policy as expressed in the 1990 Native American Languages Act.

It is demonstrably true that the fastest and most effective way to get a critical mass of new fluent speakers of an endangered language is through the schools -- the same institution that was used to try to destroy those very languages in the past. Only in the schools are there enough children spending enough of their day for the language to be effectively taught. But it is not enough to teach the language in the schools as we would teach a foreign language, with perhaps 3 hours per week of class time (if not less) in the midst of an otherwise English-speaking environment. No-one has ever become fluent that way. When we teach a foreign language, that approach can function to give a student a certain knowledge base of a language to help him function if he ever goes to a country where that language is spoken. But the development to fluency is a result of being in that country - being in the environment where he hears and uses that language all day every day. For endangered languages, such an environment does not exist. The languages are silent at home and in the community. And so the only path to fluency at this time is in immersion schools -- “language nests”, and “language survival schools” as they are labelled in S. 575, where the main language of instruction is the indigenous language itself.

There are many people who earnestly fear that having a language other than English as the medium of instruction at school means that the children will not learn English. But this is not so. For these endangered indigenous languages, the children come to school already knowing English -- they have learned it at home from their parents, from television, from their peers, and from virtually every experience in their lives involving speech. The survival schools level the playing field and have the goal of producing

balanced bilinguals -- children who are fluent and literate in both English and their own Native American language.

Having an endangered language as the medium of instruction in a school presents many challenges, but these challenges can be and have been met successfully when they arise. For example, many indigenous languages have no writing systems, but writing systems are relatively easy to develop. Some languages such as Navajo, Hawaiian and Lakota have had writing systems for over a century now; others, such as Havasupai and Hualapai, developed their writing systems during the 1970's when they founded bilingual education programs -- and still others, such as the Tolowas and Yuroks in California, have decided on their official writing systems only within the last couple of years. Any language can be written easily -- the only difficulty is to decide among the various alternatives of which symbols and spelling rules to use.

Another easy-to-solve problem is the development of vocabulary for the various subjects that must be taught in the school. If a community has never used its language to portray chemistry or higher mathematics, new words must be developed. This too is not difficult. There is sometimes debate among the community activists for endangered languages as to whether it is appropriate to introduce into the ancestral tongue these new realms of vocabulary, new genres of language that develop in written form such as essays and poetry, and western realms of knowledge -- this changes the language, certainly; and other kinds of change are also observable in the speech of children in these immersion schools, such as certain phonological changes, and new metaphors and idioms. But language change is a natural process, and it happens in all languages. If endangered languages are to survive and revive, they must be able to be used in the context of modern life and modern activities. At the same time, the schools and the indigenous communities of which they are part have the additional task of helping the students learn traditional genres of speech, cultural patterns and value systems. In the best of worlds, language change is language expansion and growth, that can still encompass the traditional culture as well as the new one.

The Hawaiians and the Blackfeet, both named in the bill, have done an admirable job of developing highly successful language nests and language survival schools, and have served as models to many other tribes. They have also been extremely generous as hosts and advisors to groups trying to develop their own language survival schools. We know through their intense hard work and leadership that these systems work successfully to educate students to be literate and fluent in their ancestral language and accustomed to using it in daily communication, and also are literate and fluent in English, and fully prepared to go on to higher education in English-speaking institutions if they so choose.

Other language nests and survival schools have also developed or are currently being developed around the country, such as those of the Cochitis and Acomas in New Mexico, the Yuroks in California, the Washos in Nevada, the Mohawks in New York, and the Lakotas in South Dakota, among others. ANA funding, granted by congress through the 1992 Native American Languages Act, has been vital to the development of these programs, along with other public and private funding from diverse sources. The

problem has been how to keep the schools going over the long run. ANA funding for a given project is usually only for 3 or 4 years, and other funding sources are generally no lengthier. The challenge is to find long-term funding for these schools, and that is the major issue that S. 575 addresses.

Passage of this bill is an essential step for the continuation of present and future language nests and language survival schools. While it may seem to some to be over-specific in how to run a language survival school, the program as defined in the bill spells out several components of success, including the necessity of having the indigenous language as the language of instruction for at least 700 hours per year, a strong program for teacher training and on-going professional development, and most interestingly, the very important component of parent participation.

I must say that from the vantage point of my home state, very few of the many tribes of California will be able to benefit from it. There is a sentence in this bill that says that small communities whose languages have few or no speakers can also be assisted by language colleges or language survival schools, but this is quite vague. The way the bill is structured makes it impossible for such communities to be assisted in any concrete way. The small endangered languages of California and elsewhere with only a handful of elderly speakers cannot yet develop immersion schools, for there are no speakers of professional age to teach the language. And because the groups who name these as their ancestral languages are so small, even if the younger adults do learn their language, it may be impossible to develop a language nest with as many as 10 students, much less a school of that size at the elementary or highschool level. The Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival runs several programs -- in particular the "Master-Apprentice Language Learning Program" for languages where professional-age tribal members who didn't learn their language can begin to do so, and the "Breath of Life" program for tribes who have no speakers at all, where they can learn their languages from linguistic documentation. It is especially difficult for the latter category to find funding, since the ANA granting policy has always been to not fund groups who have no native speakers left. Yet there are some important success stories of people who have learned their language from documentation when there are no speakers , such as Daryl Baldwin of the Miami tribe in Oklahoma, who has not only learned his language but has made it the language of his home and of daily communication with his children. I can easily imagine some of these small groups developing successful language nests, but perhaps not with as many as 10 children. While this bill cannot be everything to all people, I might suggest just one change that might make it easier for small groups to bootstrap their way into eligibility for funding -- allow the possibility of a waiver for small tribes of the rule that an immersion school must have a minimum of 10 students.

Another issue I see with this bill as it stands is that of the "demonstration programs." Hawai'i and the Piegan Institute are both extremely worthy of being demonstration sites, and have already shown their usefulness to indigenous peoples in pursuit of language reclamation. The University of Alaska has a long history of superb documentation of the native languages of that state, and has also developed state-of-the-art indigenous language teaching programs on campus. But there are other tribes with excellent

programs and other universities with strong credentials in language documentation and revitalization. I have already heard some protests from members of programs who also want to be recognized and funded as models, and I could imagine this fine bill foundering as groups in state after state want their own model program appended to it. I would hope that this could be averted by adding a paragraph to the bill that says that a restricted number of survival schools and language colleges who have demonstrated excellence may also apply to become model programs in the future.

Beyond these tiny suggestions, I see this as an excellent bill, which must be passed if this great experiment in language revitalization is to continue on. This is a sad time for Native American languages, many of which are disappearing before our eyes. But it is also an exciting time, when pioneering experiments in language revitalization are taking place, and we are seeing the wonderful result of a new generation of children who are fluent in their Native American language -- and fully bilingual in English as well. Long ago, previous congressional acts devoted enormous efforts to the schools who were charged with the eradication of Native American languages and cultural traditions. Now in this hopefully wiser time, it behooves this Congress to devote an equivalent amount of funds to help indigenous peoples regain the languages that were erased from their lives.

Respectfully submitted by Leanne Hinton
Professor, Department of Linguistics at the University of California
Founding member of the Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival