

Statement of
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before the
United States Senate
Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify on S. 575, the "Native American Languages Act Amendments Act of 2003." I wish to commend Senator Inouye and the other members of the Committee for their vision in supporting Native American languages and Native American language survival schools. I would also like to thank Senator Inouye for recognizing our school as a national demonstration program. We feel very humbled and honored to be included in this important bill.

Piegan Institute was founded in 1987 as a private 501(c)(3) not-for-profit on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in northwest Montana by a group of Blackfeet educators. Piegan Institute was founded to counteract the dramatic loss of Blackfeet language usage. Initially, Piegan Institute studied the issue of Native American languages and developed a resource center of language studies and language materials. We provided seminars for other Native communities around the nation. One thing we learned in our research and in the many discussions with elders is that at the foundation of any revitalization effort would be the children. The elders emphasized that it is through the children where hope lies.

But talking about these issues did not solve them. To make an enduring impact on the lives of Blackfeet children we decided it was time to take action and actually *do* something. After much contemplation and research we opened Nizipuhwahsin, a school for children ages 5-13 where core academic subjects are taught in the Blackfeet language. We developed our school on scientifically-based research and after carefully searching for effective models. Our search lead us to Aha Punana Leo in Hawaii. Punana Leo has an outstanding academic program taught in a Native language. Under the mentorship and guidance of Punana Leo, in a little less than ten years Nizipuhwahsin has also become recognized as a model for educating children and developing Native speakers.

Our purpose here today is to urge the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs to support the work of Native American language survival schools and to support the spirit and intent of S. 575 as it has been proposed. Native American language survival schools are methodologically and pedagogically different from public educational systems. But what is important is not the differences but the outcomes. The academic outcomes of Native American language survival schools are as strong or stronger than public education systems and students become speakers of their Native language.

Before Nizipuhwahsin the Blackfeet community tried many approaches to revitalize the Blackfeet

language. We have Head Start language programs, bilingual education programs in the public schools, language classes in high school, adult language programs at the community college and summer culture camps – but *none* of these approaches created any speakers of the Blackfeet language – the Native American language survival school approach at Nizipuhwahsin does.

The Native American language survival school method is seen by many Native communities as an innovative approach that will develop fluent speakers in their communities. Similar to Punana Leo, Nizipuhwahsin is sought out by numerous Native communities for program development and training. Native leaders and educators visit our school every month from communities all over the U.S., from southeast Alaska to southern California. Some then go back home and either modify pre-existing programs or establish new ones based on the Nizipuhwahsin model. Just this Sunday *The Missoulian*, one of Montana's largest newspapers, published a feature story on Nkwusm, the Salish Native American language survival school. Piegan Institute met with the founders of Nkwusm several times before they opened their school. They believe that after a decade of failed attempts within the public school system, the survival school approach will bring them success.

Native American language survival school will bring fluent speakers back to Native communities. At Piegan Institute we believe the loss of Native languages diminishes the truth of Native ways, and dishonors the lifetimes of our ancestors. True Native history is identified by the stories extending back (and forward) thousands of years, and retold out loud in our Native languages. The archeologist can recount thousands of years of Native existence, but only our languages remain the accurate recorder of our true history. Learn the oldest word in a Native language and you will realize how it speaks the truth.

The elders believe that the Blackfeet language is a gift from the Creator to our people and should be treated with respect. The elders also state that our ancient language is the foundation of our cultural and spiritual heritage without which we could not exist in the manner that our Creator intended. Native languages contain the genesis, cosmology, history, and secrets within. Without our language our world will become permanently lost, or irrevocably changed.

The elders say that cultural identity can be learned through the names people originally gave – in their own, original language. Language and names are the key. *Here is power*. Today, the Blackfeet language is threatened and so are the names, songs, and stories – those elements that give direction and render Blackfeet life distinct and intelligible to its members. Names, like songs and dreams, are guide posts and with their steady erosion comes cultural loss and the loss of community identity.

Elders carefully choose and transfer Blackfeet names to family members. These names have significant meaning and power to an individual throughout their lifetime. People's names guide them through their journey in life. It is very important, say the elders, that every individual have in their possession their own unique name.

Many Blackfeet elders experienced most of the major federal policies affecting Indian people. The re-naming of individuals at school was one of the first policies to dramatically change Blackfeet society.

The elders talked about their concerns of public education and their experiences when they attended school. The public education system provided hardships on Native children that made it difficult to learn. Their Blackfoot language was never accepted within the walls of the school and was not accepted on the school grounds. Nevertheless, Blackfeet elders as children still tried hard to succeed in school.

But the elders value western education and strongly encourage their children and grandchildren to become educated. All the elders want their children to become educated and recognize that education is a crucial part of our lives today. At times education is compared to survival by the elders. But true education to the elders also entails being able to speak the Blackfeet language. The true knowledge of the Blackfeet people rests in the language.

Consequently, the elders are currently worried that many of these federal policies and especially those affecting public education do not support the tribes in their efforts to restore Native knowledge and transfer knowledge to younger generations. Their faith in the public school system is diminishing, and many of the elders are recommending community-based programs to teach Blackfeet knowledge.

Piegan Institute developed out of that concern and desire. The Blackfeet community learned that the Native American language survival school concept is an excellent approach for learning a language. The elders highly support this method of teaching the Blackfeet language as it is being implemented at Nizipuhwahsin. The elders have witnessed the capabilities of the children in mastering the language as well as their success in conventional academic terms.

The Blackfeet tribe (Resolution #146-2003) believes that Native American language survival school approach succeeds at developing fluent speakers and educating children. Success for other Native communities will occur when those communities develop similar programs. Piegan Institute strongly urges the Committee to support Native American language survival schools.

We are often asked about the success of Piegan Institute and Nizipuhwahsin School. We can only tell you this – you do not need permission to study or learn your language. Make your prayers to the Creator for strength, and trust in what is provided. Do not debate with people who question your journey. Linguistic anthropologist Ives Goodard, when asked the question, how do you revive a language, jokingly answered, just open your mouth and start talking. On the Blackfeet Indian reservation in Montana because of Nizipuhwahsin, the children have opened their mouths and started talking, and the world is listening.