

TESTIMONY OF
NĀMAKA RAWLINS
LIAISON FOR CONSORTIUM OF
‘AHA PŪNANA LEO (PRIVATE NON PROFIT LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION ORG.),
NĀWAHĪOKALANI‘ŌPU‘U LABORATORY SCHOOL (PRESCHOOL TO GRADE 12 HAWAIIAN
LANGUAGE MEDIUM), AND KA HAKA ‘ULA O KE‘ELIKŌLANI (HAWAIIAN LANGUAGE
COLLEGE)
ON
OVERSIGHT HEARING ON
**“EXAMINING EFFORTS TO MAINTAIN AND REVITALIZE NATIVE
LANGUAGES FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.”**
SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
22 AUGUST 2018

‘Auhea ‘oukou e ka Lunaho ‘omalu Kenekoa Hoeven, ka Hope Lunaho ‘omalu Udall, ke Kenekoa Schatz o ku ‘u ‘āpana pono ‘i, a me nā kenekoa lālā a pau o kēia kōmike hanohano o ka ‘Aha ‘ōlelo Nui, ‘o ke Kōmike Kuleana ‘Ilikini, aloha nui ‘oukou a pau.

GREETING

Chairman Hoeven, Vice Chairman Udall, Senator Schatz representing my own home state of Hawaii, and all other Senators on this distinguished Committee on Indian Affairs, warm aloha to each and every one of you.

My name is Nāmaka Rawlins. I am one of twelve children raised on the Keaukaha Hawaiian Homestead, lands restricted for Native Hawaiians. I am the Outreach Specialist of the ‘Aha Pūnana Leo, Inc. and the Liaison of the state Hawaiian language college and its laboratory school. These entities work together and represent Hawai‘i's only P-20 vertical alignment of the Hawaiian language medium education system.

P-20 refers to an educational pipeline from early childhood through to the doctorate all taught through the Native Hawaiian language. Our consortium is the oldest, largest and most developed integrated Native American language system. We are part of a larger effort within our state that serves over 3,000 students preschool to grade 12 totally through Hawaiian.

I am also Vice President of the National Coalition of Native American Language Schools and Programs. Our National Coalition provides mutual support among immersion programs and schools operating in 17 states, with over 1,000 students in languages other than Hawaiian. There is a strong grassroots movement in Native communities nationwide to create more schools and programs of this sort.

FOCUS OF TESTIMONY IS ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL OUTCOMES

Shortly after being elected Senator Schatz visited our program. He encouraged us to collect information on our outcomes beyond our successes in saving our language and culture. Here I will focus on the sorts of information that Senator Schatz has urged us to

collect. I will provide an addendum later with more detailed information on our Hawaiian language and culture revitalization efforts and the National Coalition.

DEFINITION: NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGE MEDIUM/IMMERSION

I want to state that the three Hawaiian entities which I represent are but part of a larger picture in Hawai'i, and a still larger picture nationally of schools that teach through Native languages. That is my testimony will be on schools and programs that teach math, reading, history etc. through Native languages to both children who come to school knowing the language and those who enter knowing only English.

This approach is often called "Native American language immersion schooling" or "Native American language medium schooling". Native American language medium/immersion is the method that linguists and other scientists have found to be the most effective in actually reversing the loss Native American languages as living first languages. Students who graduate from our Hawaiian language medium school are raising their own children speaking Hawaiian, something that had happened in our community since the early 1900s.

I am honored to be here with you and to sit on a panel with such knowledgeable witnesses. This committee has been the entity that has stood up for our languages. I especially want to acknowledge the leadership of Senator McCain of Arizona who introduced the Native American Languages Act (NALA) in 1990, a landmark piece of legislation authored and approved in a bipartisan manner from this Committee.

I mention that history, Senators, because this committee has been the driving force to help restore our languages in a larger nation where there is little understanding of distinctive needs of schooling through Native American languages. This committee and its bipartisan outreach is the one that has the most access to understanding the distinctiveness of our needs and assure integration into the larger body of federal law.

ENGLISH ACQUISITION

While Native American language medium/immersion education is best practice for language revitalization and maintenance, there is an insufficient understanding of its merits among educators and others influencing the learning environments of Native children. One major misunderstanding is that children in these schools will not be able to speak English. We have had students graduating with total Hawaiian medium education since 1999. All have been as proficient in spoken and written English as their peers graduating from total English medium high schools. Within our National Coalition, I have never heard of a student in a Native American medium/immersion school that has not been able to speak, read, write English upon reaching age 18 and moving to college or the workforce. Our methodology is similar to that used to teach English in Nordic countries such as Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Finland.

"AT RISK" STUDENTS CORE OF OUR ENROLLMENT

The enrollment both in Hawai‘i and in the National Coalition schools is heavily skewed to "at risk students". For example, in our P-12 laboratory school Nāwahīokalani‘ōpu‘u, the enrollment is 97% Native Hawaiian with 70% free and reduced lunch eligible status. Almost all students use non-standard Pidgin English or Hawaiian in their homes - that is they fit the federal definition of "Limited English speakers". In addition, our laboratory school is located in one of two districts in our state identified as having the most educational and social challenges. Most members schools in the National Coalition are located on reservations with large numbers of Native students who come from dire social and economic situations.

NO HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

In the local English medium schools in Hawai‘i, "at risk" students are those expected to drop out or if they graduate from high school do not pursue post high education. Senators, Native American language medium/immersion education has produced outstanding results relative to high school graduation and college attendance rates. Our Hawaiian language consortium's demonstration school Nāwahīokalani‘ōpu‘u has had a rate of 100% high school graduation from its first class in 1999. Its college attendance rate directly from high school is over 80%.

In our laboratory school, all students have the same curriculum regardless of their educational status. Our curriculum combines college preparatory courses taught through Hawaiian plus work on the land and sea that connects to our Native Hawaiian traditions. We value the student who decides to seek out a life career in traditional Hawaiian farming, hunting, and fishing or music just as much as the student who goes on to become a doctor or lawyer. All students are expected to serve their community through the Hawaiian perspective based on language and culture.

The results I have described above regarding English proficiency, academic achievement and community commitment is from the data we have collected over these many years. Similar results are being realized among schools and programs teaching totally or primarily through a Native American language throughout our National Coalition schools.

EARLY READING ADVANTAGES

At the Pūnana Leo language nest preschools, we teach our 3 and 4 year olds to read Native Hawaiian starting with chanted syllables. Our pre-k children can read single unfamiliar words, sentences and short paragraphs the year before entering kindergarten.

Another factor to early reading is the Hakalama, the Hawaiian writing system. Like the writing system of other Native American languages, the Hawaiian writing system is highly systematic. One letter one sound. English spelling is highly irregular. Many sounds per letter; many letters per sounds. The early reading skills we can easily teach through Hawaiian or another Native American language cannot be easily taught in English until two years later in grade 1. Through our National Coalition we are sharing best practices regarding reading instruction through Native American languages.

Members of the National Coalition are reporting the same results for early reading through their own languages.

Early reading is a huge advantage. Once a child can read in one language it is easy to learn to read in another language. A student who is a good reader in a Native American language can easily transfer that reading skill to English and other languages. We have evidence for that in our laboratory school where our students study in addition to Hawaiian and English, Japanese, Latin and the most recent addition of Mandarin Chinese.

HIGH BILINGUALISM AND THE BRAIN - COGNITIVE ADVANTAGE

Scientists tell us that knowing two languages at a highly proficient level has a positive effect on the brain. That is students who are highly proficient in two languages have a cognitive advantage. This cognitive advantage affects the learning of mathematics, science, social science, third languages, and other academic subjects. Scientific research has also shown that they have a high level of "executive control" in their thinking process, that is they can concentrate better.

Senators, we know that maintaining and revitalizing traditional languages at a very high level of proficiency has positive academic and social effects. Also, maintaining and revitalizing our traditional languages contributes to distinct Native identities. However, that knowledge and awareness of best practices is not widespread among the mainstream educators who hold power over our children's schooling. Our challenge is overcoming administrative and other institutional barriers. These barriers prevent the high level of proficiency in the Native American language needed to produce the cognitive advantage as the base for further learning including English.

FLEXIBILITY KEY TO UNLEASHING POWER OF PARENTS

One size fits all education is an obstacle to advancing and developing Native American language medium/immersion education. The key is flexibility that allows the parents and local language oriented community members to move the program forward. Parents taking on responsibility for its development is a huge aspect of a Native language medium/immersion educational effort. This is why Native American language medium/immersion education has resulted in major social change in communities. Every single parent and family member plays a crucial and important role.

In Hawaiian medium education we have witnessed families who are positively impacted by our program. Parents work to learn the language and become teachers. It is not possible to import teachers from out-of-state as we do for community schools taught in the medium of English. Our parents have to work together to fix and clean classrooms, operate fundraisers, and provide support for sports and cultural activities. Our parents have to figure out how to develop books and teaching materials on their own as they cannot be imported from elsewhere in order to support Hawaiian language learning.

The non-profit where I work, the 'Aha Pūnana Leo, was founded in 1983, the same year that Senator Andrews of North Dakota was able to establish a permanent Senate Committee of Indian Affairs. We began with no money. Our organization surveyed the number of children aged 18 and under statewide with fluency in our language. There were less than 50 - 37 to be exact. It was also illegal in Hawaii for our language to be used in school, a hold over from a 1896 law. We moved forward to establish language nest preschools and from there full preschool to high school programs and then a Hawaiian language college with its own teacher preparation program through Hawaiian. We started with parents laying cement, creating simple books, supporting teachers by bringing in different cultural plants and fish, by studying our languages and making the decision to go to college.

NALA ALIGNMENT CRUCIAL TO MOVING FORWARD

The Native American Languages (NALA) policy that your committee established in 1990 has been a key tool in the growth of schools and immersion language programs. NALA helped propel our movement to reclaim and revitalize our indigenous language. Yet, the reality is that most federal educational and other key legislation affecting our Native communities are not properly aligned with NALA.

Senators, members of this important committee, I ask that you continue your good work, your strong bipartisan leadership, on behalf of our Native American language revitalization and maintenance efforts. I urge that you use your unique strengths as a bipartisan group to move other committees to align their work and legislation to NALA, the Native American Languages Act. I urge that you inform them of best practices that have emerged from Native American language medium and immersion schools and that those best practices be referenced in legislation and policy as well.

No laila, mahalo nui loa iā 'oukou e nā Kenekoa i ke kono 'ana mai ia 'u e kū hō 'ike i mua o 'oukou no kēia kumuhana ko 'iko 'i no nā kaiāulu o mākou nā 'ōiwi o ka 'āina.