

TESTIMONY OF
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KOTZEBUE, ALASKA
ON
**TRANSFORMATIVE AND INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES FOR BETTER
EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR ALASKA NATIVE STUDENTS.”**
SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
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Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am an educator by career, but my passion has been creating healthy, engaging and meaningful opportunities that contribute to the health and wellbeing of my people. I come here today to share with you my perspective on growing up Indigenous in an American school system, and what I envision will improve outcomes for Alaska Native students.

First, I want to point out that classrooms in Alaska, in many regards, looks like classrooms in the Lower 48. The system is just built this way - curriculum, textbooks, teaching practices, extracurricular activity, and even school year calendars derive from hundreds of years of Western cultural foundations that are not like the cultural foundations in the communities these classrooms reside in.

I have worked for decades as an educational professional, and have given my best run at improving outcomes while working within a Western system, and I have also been involved with creating a opportunities outside the system. Much of what has been tried in typical Alaskan classrooms comes from well-intended educators implementing best practices that work in classrooms in places like Texas. And for Texas, this absolutely fits. But I tell you what, I've felt a dissonance at times with this work. This is not only because the cultural underpinnings of our communities are different (I will get to that later), but also because from the outset, the intention of schooling in Alaska Native communities was to "Americanize" Alaska's Indigenous people through schooling.

There is a point in just about every Alaska Native and American Indian student's journey through school when it occurs to us that we weren't necessarily meant to be present in the classroom. In that moment, one is aware that they are wholly intact, yet reading and answering test questions about manifest destiny and US assimilation policies. What's poignant for Alaska Native students is that this realization occurs in classrooms that sit on our lands.

Tweaking the resources that exist doesn't get at the heart of the transformative education that's needed to improve outcomes for Alaska Native youth. Let's face it, even when a textbook publisher works to accurately tell the story of America's Indigenous people, it's not told for full benefit of the Alaskan Native and American Indian. The most powerful way to create educational benefit is for Alaskan Natives to construct our own education system.

Even with the injurious practices that have been implemented in past decades, education for Alaska Native youth is ripe with possibility. There is a resilience that has not been extinguished. Throughout the decades before today, both elders and language and culture experts have been dutifully preparing for a

time when education for Alaska Native students is of, for, and by Alaska Natives. In the case of my own home region, there are transcribed and translated interviews and stories collected throughout the 1970s and 1980s that are waiting to be relearned and introduced back into our collective knowledge.

Our students are worth this re-engagement. Imagine a 4th grade boy is investigating habitat and human impact who is doing this while checking a rabbit snare. In his own Indigenous language, he is learning the respectful practices elders have passed on. When he harvests a rabbit, he butchers the rabbit, speaking with his teacher in Iñupiaq, asking questions and responding to directions. Not only will this young boy learn valuable knowledge to sustain our lands and ways of understanding the environment and our place within it, but this boy also feels validated and engaged in school.

I believe this type of experience is important. Alaska Native students' academic, social, and emotional outcomes need transformative change of this nature so that Alaska Native students can thrive. I no longer want students to experience their "otherness" from the classroom that sits on their own homelands. Instead, classroom experiences should build identity, empowerment, and connection. Alaska Native communities have cultural practices, rich histories, and important perspectives on the environment and the treatment of humankind, and this should be taught in school.

Visioning about Indigenous language revitalization often comes up when this type of transformative change is discussed. Inherent in Alaska's Indigenous languages is knowledge about the land, environment and relationships Indigenous people have within families and with each other. Teaching through the language provides the fullest access to traditional knowledge. Through effective revitalization efforts, Alaskan classrooms can be a place where children learn content such as math, reading, science and history through their Native language. One example of where this is happening is in a primary grade classroom in Nome where the teacher has been working with fluent speakers and curriculum developers to create math lessons in Iñupiaq.

Incidentally, my two youngest sons learned to read in Iñupiaq before they learned to read in English at Nikaitchuat, the tribal immersion school in Kotzebue, over twenty years ago. When they moved on to the public school, as with many other Nikaitchuat students, their academic reading skills were strong, not negatively impacted by having learned both how to read in Iñupiaq first.

There has been significant work by Indigenous groups around language revitalization, and what has become clear is that the work needs a new brand of curriculum and teacher preparation. Before we can teach children, we must have the right kind of teachers. For illustration of the kind of teacher needed, one of the effective models used in Salish language revitalization. The approach has produced proficient adult speakers who are equipped to teach through an Indigenous perspective using curriculum they have developed throughout their training. In this program, adult learners' work with elders transcribing stories that they have recorded. This generates advanced literature and documents for curriculum and publication. This process also importantly documents precious elder knowledge.

The scenarios I have shared are just a few examples of Indigenous education that gives Alaska Native youth a sense of place and belonging that is absent in Western education. There are many exciting developments that are converging on this front and there is already synergy, collaboration and innovation amongst Alaskans who are seeking to transform the educational experience for Alaskan Native children. My hope is that you also have this vision and can support efforts to enable innovations like these to occur. Thank you for your time, and I am here to answer questions.

