

TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS

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Legislative Hearing: Examining Efforts to Maintain and Revitalize Native Languages
for Future Generations

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INTRODUCTION:

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished members of the Committee, *Guw'aadzi Hauba, Gai dawaa trôdray'aash'apuka*. In my native Keres-Acoma language, Greetings to all of you this afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and present my remarks on an issue that is critical to all American Indian peoples, that is, the survival of America's Indigenous languages and cultures. My name is Christine Pasqual Sims. I am from the Pueblo of Acoma in New Mexico. I am an Associate Professor in the Department of Language, Literacy and Sociocultural Studies in the College of Education at the University of New Mexico (UNM) and I also direct the American Indian Language Policy Research and Teacher Training Center (AILPRTTC). My remarks today on "Efforts to Maintain and Revitalize Native languages for Future Generations" will address two key areas that I believe are critical to the sustainability and continued growth of language initiatives that have emerged over the last decade and a half. These are: 1) the expansion of language efforts into schools and the impact of educational policy and 2) the expansion of language revitalization efforts in early childhood education and the implications for continued support services for Native language initiatives. My testimony is based on my collaborative work with American Indian tribes, Native language teachers and practitioners, language program administrators, schools, and members of tribal communities. I understand that my oral remarks must be brief today, however, I have prepared my comments in more detail in my written testimony respectfully submitted for the record.

PART ONE: BACKGROUND OF OUR WORK

The American Indian Language Policy Research and Teacher Training Center (AILPRTTC) is based in the College of Education at the University of New Mexico (UNM). The Center came into being in 2008 following the passage of the Esther Martinez Language Preservation Act. I testified before this Committee in 2003 regarding the proposed amendments to the Native Languages Act of 1990/1992, and again in 2006, before the U.S. House of Representatives Field Hearing on the *Recovery and Preservation of Native American Languages* (Sims, 2003; 2006). In both of my testimonies I advocated and strongly recommended UNM as a demonstration site for a regional technical assistance and teacher-training center to help support tribes in their efforts to establish community-based and school-based language initiatives. This was a direct outcome of cumulative work I had completed while a doctoral student at UC-Berkeley and my early work in Native bilingual education through a New Mexico-based non-profit training organization, the Linguistic Institute for Native Americans, which I co-founded in the early 1980s. My relationship over the years with various tribal language communities, listening to their goals and visions for restoring spoken languages, their challenges in

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implementing language initiatives and the need for support services to initiate and expand their language efforts, has continued to guide my present work at the Center.

With initial support from the U.S. Department of Education I was able to see our Center become a reality and today the AILPRTTC is still involved in the work of providing Native language teacher training and technical assistance to tribes. UNM is the only Institution of Higher Education in New Mexico that provides these services on a year round basis. We work closely with tribes providing training for speakers of Native languages through workshops, university courses, an annual Native American Language Teachers' Institutes (NALTI), language symposia and community forums. We have also had the opportunity to mentor and support seven Indigenous graduate students pursuing Master's and Doctoral degrees with a focus on bilingual education and American Indian Languages and Education. As resources are available, we are able to hire these students as Graduate Assistants in our Center working with us on outreach and language teacher training activities, gathering participant evaluation data, helping prepare training materials for workshops and summer institutes, and learning the technical aspects of materials development equipment used in training teachers how to produce their own language teaching materials.

While the majority of our institutional and tribal partners are located in New Mexico and the southwest, our annual summer institutes also attract participants from tribes and indigenous communities outside New Mexico expanding our outreach far beyond the state. We have had, for example, participants from Alaska, Arizona, North Carolina, Iowa, Oklahoma, and Ecuador. The Center continues to build and expand these efforts by bringing together the academic resources of the University's College of Education and veteran practitioners in the field of Native language teaching, tribal government leaders, and members of indigenous language communities. We consider the engagement of tribal communities as the critical resources and decision-makers in efforts to maintain their respective languages in the midst of rapidly expanding global influences. As well, the impact of national and local education policies that often place tremendous pressure on school-age generations to abandon their mother tongue and shift exclusively to English language use is a continuing challenge facing many tribes today.

In summary, the mission of the AILPRTTC is to serve as a local, regional and national center of outreach, service, advocacy, and collaborative research, examining policy issues affecting the survival and maintenance of American Indian languages.

PART TWO: GROWTH AND EXPANSION OF LANGUAGE EFFORTS AND IMPACT OF FEDERAL EDUCATIONAL POLICIES

Over the course of nearly two decades, efforts to teach Native languages have grown almost exponentially across this nation since the dawn of a new century. In New Mexico for example, the first summer immersion programs that began in the mid-1990s as community-based efforts involving fluent language speakers from the community gradually expanded into school settings by 2001 so that children could continue to receive year round instruction in the Native language. In 2003, I spoke before this Committee about some of these early efforts in my own Pueblo of Acoma as well as other tribes such as the Pueblo of Cochiti, both of whom were embarking on language immersion initiatives in their communities for the first time (Sims, 2003). In anticipation of these new developments, we researched the most prominent and successful Indigenous instructional models that existed at the time, namely the immersion programs developed by the Maori, Hawaiian, the Akwesasne of New York and the Karuk people of California. We learned about their immersion programs and how they implemented this approach as an effective way to teach language. We trained each other, sharing the experiences of other

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tribes through community forums, institutes and conferences, gradually developing an informal network of fluent speakers, elders, parents and community members committed to seeing their children learn their Native language.

According to a 2018 report produced by the Language and Culture Bureau in the New Mexico Public Education Department most of the state's 7 major Native languages, including Tiwa, Tewa, Towa, Keres, Zuni, Navajo and Apache are now being taught in at least 15 different public school districts. Other tribes, such as the Diné Nation, have addressed language revitalization efforts by establishing Navajo language immersion schools in Arizona. These schools are in operation today, in towns and rural communities such as Ft. Defiance, Tuba City, Leupp, and Rough Rock, Arizona. More recently, in northwestern New Mexico, a Navajo immersion charter school, the Dream Diné Charter School and a Dual Language Program in the Central Consolidated School District are additional examples of alternative school-based language efforts. The New Mexico Public Education Department reports that approximately 5,800 children participate in Navajo language classes in various public schools (NMPED Language and Culture Bureau, 2018). Immersion schools in particular, have produced some of the more notable examples of the Navajo language rebounding among children who are becoming fluent once again in the language.

These developments over the past 10-plus years have not been without their challenges. There has been a concomitant pattern of federal rules and policies that have often threatened the very goals that tribes have set regarding the education of their children, including language and culture programs in schools. Some of these past policies are well-known such as the *2001 No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) which was so detrimental to Native language initiatives in schools on several fronts, including teacher credentialing requirements, standardized assessment requirements, prescribed curriculums and scripted instruction. Most notably, for Native language teachers and students, the heavy NCLB emphasis on English literacy, language arts, and mathematics meant a reduction in time and attention to Native language instruction. In New Mexico and Arizona, for example, we observed reductions in Native language instructional time, in some cases, to a mere 30 minutes two to three times a week in elementary schools. Native speakers were also eliminated as teachers of language in Arizona public schools due to the "highly qualified" requirements of NCLB.

In response, there were valiant efforts to push back on these policies from all fronts, including tribal leaders, expert academics (Beaulieu, Sparks & Alonzo, 2005; McCarty, 2003; Wilson, 2012;), Native language educators, and other language advocates. Additionally, in states like New Mexico where 22 different tribal nations exist, each with their own Native language, proactive movement was made towards establishing tribal oversight for verifying the Native language proficiency of their respective community members and recommending them for certification as Native language teachers through Memoranda of Agreement (MOA) with the New Mexico State Department of Education. The New Mexico *520 Alternative Certificate for Native Speakers* was created in 2002 followed by the passage of the *2003 Indian Education Act* by the New Mexico state legislature. This Act specifically called for the development of strategies for ensuring the maintenance of Native languages in an effort to ensure equitable and culturally relevant learning for Native students in public schools. These represented major shifts in both policy and process where tribes exercised their sovereignty and self-determination concerning language and education issues. These MOAs are still in effect today with most of the 22 tribes of New Mexico having established their own individual agreements with the New Mexico Public Education Department.

As NCLB was phased out, a new federal education policy centered around *Common Core Standards*, once more set the bar for the nation's public schools. What was no different from

NCLB, however, was the fact that these standards were once more English-based sets of standards, primarily relying on standardized on-line PARCC assessments to measure the academic progress of students. Various states, including New Mexico, remain closely tied to these assessments which often show American Indian students scoring at the lowest levels on these tests. As a result, the emphasis is once again placed on schools and teachers to raise test scores in order to avoid being labeled as failing schools and ineffective instructors.

A very recent ruling by the First Judicial Court of New Mexico, in the *Yazzie/Martinez Case (Yazzie, et al. v. State of New Mexico, et al.)*, however, found the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) and the Secretary of NMPED to be in violation of the rights of “at risk” students including Native American, English language learners, and other economically disadvantaged students. The Court ruled that they had failed to provide sufficient programs and services required by the state’s constitution for these students’ education. For Native American students specifically, their continued failure in reading, math, and science was determined to be a direct link to the failure of state education policies and a failure to implement the *2003 New Mexico Indian Education Act*. State resources to local school districts were also shown to be insufficient, hindering their ability to provide programs encouraging the use of the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students. In particular, it was noted that “culturally relevant instructional materials” were also lacking (Chosa, C., Fairbanks, C., Pecos, R., & Yepa, J., 2018, p. 6). The implications of this case have been described as a “watershed moment” in the state’s education history opening the potential for increased attention to Native language programs. Indeed, this was identified as one of the key priorities at a recent statewide Pueblo Indian Convocation held July, 2018 at Santa Ana Pueblo with specific recommendations such as:

- Increasing Native language teacher capacity;
- Providing professional development for Native language teachers that is closely aligned to local tribal goals for language instruction;
- Increasing the compensation of Native language teachers equal to regular teachers rather than educational assistants;
- Assessing language teaching and language development utilizing appropriate and more authentic measures to document these processes;
- Ensuring that federal policies that are supportive of language efforts (Head Start for example) are understood by program directors, administrators and school Principals, and implemented at the local level with appropriate input from tribal communities, tribal leaders and parents.

PART THREE: GROWTH AND EXPANSION OF LANGUAGE EFFORTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The challenge of cultural and linguistic survival for many tribes today has become an increasingly urgent focus in developing early childhood programs that support the maintenance and revitalization of Native languages. The legacy and outcomes of more than two centuries of dominant education systems aimed at assimilation of American Indian children (Adams, 1988) has specifically been associated with the loss and erosion of native languages across all tribal groups in the United States (Krauss, 1998). The impact such losses can have on the self-identity, self-confidence and academic success of today’s Native youth are fundamental considerations for how Native children’s development and learning are supported in their early years.

American Indian early childhood programs, including federal and state funded Head Start programs serving children from birth through age 5, therefore, play a critical role in supporting

Native children at their most vulnerable and critical stages of sociocultural, emotional, physical, cognitive and Native language development.

The National Office for American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start Programs reports that nearly 37,000 or 45% of American Indian and Alaska Native children were served in Head Start programs in Region XI in 2015 (2015 FACES Report). The 2019 version of the Family and Child Services Survey (FACES) is currently being updated to include more descriptive information about children's exposure and participation in Native language and cultural learning. I have been involved in this latest effort as well as joining the National Advisory Council for American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start Programs. A positive sign in federal agencies such as Head Start is a growing recognition that local language revitalization efforts are important and critical in the development of children as well as strengthening family and community relationships through language. In New Mexico, we have observed the transition of one of these federally funded programs from an English-based program to a full Native language immersion program. In Jemez Pueblo, the Walatowa Head Start Program provides a Towa language learning environment for pre-school children. The Towa language is only spoken in the Pueblo of Jemez and is an unwritten language. Heretofore, this language has been a viable one, spoken across all generations of the Pueblo. Towa erosion however was increasingly evident, especially among preschool children and the concern among the community was the need for reinforcing and re-strengthening Towa language use among the youngest generations. Thus, the decision was made to revamp the entire program. This transition has been taking place over the last five years engaging tribal elders, parents, and educational leaders in the community in the process. Parents play an important role in making choices about how the program can respond to the Native language development needs of their children while also becoming involved in reinforcing language use at home.

In another Pueblo community, the Pueblo of Cochiti, another recent development focused on young children learning the Keres language has taken root in a Montessori school, established by an educator from this community. Ms. Trisha Moquino, a Native speaker of Keres, trained as a Montessori teacher envisioned a learning environment in which children would be exposed to fluent Keres teachers and begin to learn the language in an immersion setting. The school now provides a full Keres immersion environment for children ages 3-5 and a dual language program for children ages 6-8.

Home-based care is also another language initiative being implemented in one Pueblo community. In this program our Center has provided guidance to caregivers who are fluent speakers in how to support Native language development for young children while they are in their care. In this Keres-speaking community, young female caregivers have increased their awareness of how critical their role is in using the Native language in everyday home environments. All now actively use their language with children and plan activities in the home setting that engage them in play and creative experiences. Thus children are given a true "head start" in hearing and using the language with fluent speakers as an everyday part of their daily experiences.

In one community where a local Bureau of Indian Education school has transitioned to a tribal grant school, adults who are not fluent in their Native language are embarking on utilizing a Master-Apprentice model in order to learn language that they can in turn use with young children they will teach. Communities with fewer fluent adult speakers such as these often face critical challenges in how they will implement language instruction and this often necessitates different approaches to the problem.

In all of these initiatives, our Center's involvement has been to support these efforts by providing training for fluent speakers in strategies for language immersion teaching, planning,

and materials development. We have also guided adult language learners in forming teams as a means for improving and strengthening their Native language in order to teach young children. The outcomes of these particular initiatives are proving to be encouraging as parents and community members report a growing number of children learning and using these languages at school and in the community as well as adult and parent engagement in language and cultural learning. As these initiatives grow and expand, however, so too will new questions and challenges arise. For example, how will the gains that children are making in learning their Native language be documented, considering that some languages such as Keres and Towa are unwritten? How will children's Native language development continue to be supported as they mature and transition to Kindergarten and elementary schools? How are parents to be supported when they are not fluent in their own Native language?

The implications for expanding language revitalization efforts in early childhood are especially significant when one considers that intergenerational transmission of Native languages has traditionally been the process for sustaining languages across multiple generations. When that process is broken, alternative choices to standard mainstream models of early childhood education have to be considered in order to stem further language erosion. In New Mexico, where there is a current push to pour more dollars into early childhood programs, much of the emphasis is on mainstream English-based models. In response to this growing public discourse, our Center has recently developed a position statement on what early childhood education policies and state funding streams need to consider where Native languages are endangered. Our position is that early childhood programs must first ensure that tribal voices are at the forefront of designing and implementing programs that will help them achieve their collective vision for young children, encompassing the child and his/her family as members of unique cultural and language communities, and providing them rich linguistic and culturally appropriate early learning experiences.

Informed policy makers must also consider how public policies, funding resources, and programmatic decisions can impact the future survival of Native languages and cultures that are an integral and necessary foundation for the health and well-being of young Native children. In particular, such programs must be of high quality reflecting tribal goals for their children, as exemplified in their curriculums, appropriate instructional practices that support Native language and culture, collaborative family and community relationships, high staffing qualifications, and positive learning environments. We believe that these principles also extend to how program evaluations are conducted. They must be conducted through appropriate processes that are inclusive of tribal goals, family and children's strengths, needs, and learning experiences. In summary, we take the position that early childhood programs for American Indian children:

- must implement Native language instructional programs and provide learning environments that are consistent with tribal goals for their children including their sociocultural, emotional, physical, cognitive and linguistic development.
- must collaborate with children's families and their communities in order to foster children's development and nurture families as advocates for their children.
- must develop children's sense of belonging and developing their ability to contribute to his/her community by utilizing cultural and other resources that link their culture and language learning experiences to home, family and community.
- must develop Native children's sense of individual worth, while helping them to thrive and reach their full potential within the contexts of family and tribal community life.

Finally, in order to ensure that all Native language programs are successful in their planning, implementation, and sustainability, there must be:

- Funding resources allocated to sufficiently support the sustainability and growth of local leadership and staffing, provide appropriate facilities, physical environments, equipment and materials, and effectively implement high quality experiences for Native children's learning and language development.
- Funding resources that will sufficiently build the professional development and growth of a tribal language teaching workforce with the knowledge, sensitivity, and competencies necessary for working with Native children, their families and communities, as well as specialized knowledge and competencies in the Native language and culture of the children they serve.
- Funding resources that will create pathways for members of tribal communities who wish to pursue coursework leading to specialized degree programs in early childhood, elementary or secondary education at local tribal colleges or universities that offer an emphasis on working in tribal communities and their languages.
- Funding resources that sufficiently support pathways and mentorships for tribal community members who will work in collaboration with elders and fluent speakers and holders of cultural knowledge in order to sustain a viable culture and language teaching workforce in Native communities.
- Funding resources that will sufficiently support working partnerships between tribes, tribal language programs and universities in order to provide year round technical assistance and training for Native speakers, tribal members, and education administrators in their efforts to develop, and maintain their native languages.

PART FOUR: FINAL CONCLUSIONS

While my testimony has touched briefly on a number of issues related to current efforts to maintain Native languages for future generations, what I have presented today has hopefully provided a window into the complex nature of language revitalization work in our communities. The nature of this work is challenging, yet deeply rewarding, when one sees the outcomes of local tribal choices and decisions that promote the revitalization of Indigenous languages. Without these critical linguistic resources we stand to lose cultural knowledge, our collective histories, traditions and spiritual practices. Working in collaboration with tribal communities, we are always reminded that thoughtful consideration must always be acknowledged for the inherent wisdom and knowledge about language that Native speakers possess. Their perspectives about the issues and challenges they face in maintaining their languages as well as the solutions they generate and implement to address language needs in their communities is paramount in our work. We are often reminded by our elders that our languages have been gifted to us by our Creator and in this sense we often speak about these languages with a sense of sacredness. It is also with a sense that sustainability of languages requires long-term commitment to Native communities and a willingness to learn from them and be guided by their wisdom and knowledge. My hope is that this will also be a consideration among legislators and policy makers when deliberations are made concerning the education of Native children.

Thank for giving me the opportunity to share my observations, thoughts and reflections with you today. I look forward to any questions that you may have for me as well.

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