

Before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
Testimony of Larry C. Lasley Sr., on behalf of the Meskwaki Tribe
“In Our Way: Expanding the Success of Native Language & Culture-Based Education”
Thursday, May 26, 2011

Chairman Akaka, Vice Chairman Barrasso and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on a topic critical to the Meskwaki people. My name is Larry Lasley, and I serve on the Meskwaki Settlement School Board, which oversees our Tribe’s Settlement School, a BIA grant-funded school serving students from early childhood through the 12th grade. I am also the Tribe’s Economic Development Director, a position which uniquely qualifies me to address the importance of educating our young people.

I come before you today to speak on the significance of an education rooted in our traditional language and cultural values. Like many of my people, I am concerned about the dwindling number of fluent Meskwaki speakers on our Settlement. With each passing generation, fewer of our tribal members possess the ability to converse in the language provided by our Creator. This situation threatens to extinguish our language from our Settlement. Such a loss of language would carry profound and tragic consequences for my people. For this reason, our tribe is acting aggressively to stop this language loss, implementing programs in our school and our community to the best of our abilities. Without this concerted intervention, our youngest fluent speakers will soon be too old to effectively teach the Meskwaki language to a new generation.

Over the past decade, we have implemented two comprehensive surveys of our Tribal members to better understand the status of the Meskwaki language on our Settlement. According to these surveys, the 1960s marked the beginning of a language shift—one which continues to this day. When I speak of language shift, I speak of a shift away from the heritage language of Meskwaki and a strengthening of the English language among my people. In essence, fluency in English began to replace fluency in Meskwaki. As a result, each subsequent decade since the 1960s has yielded decreased fluency among tribal members; now, unfortunately, it has advanced to the point where our children are not mastering the Meskwaki language. More troubling, this language shift has undermined the Tribe's very ability to teach our children our native tongue.

The most recent survey, conducted during the tribal membership audit of 2010, found that only 16 percent of tribal members identify themselves as "fluent" in the Meskwaki language. On the other hand, 63 percent said they understood only a few words or no words at all. While it is fortunate that almost all tribal members (90 percent) understand something of the language, the age distribution of these figures exhibits the critical situation we face. The majority of fluent speakers are 50 or older. Virtually no tribal members under the age of 40 are fluent in the Meskwaki language.

These facts carry profound implications for the strength of the Meskwaki nation. Our language is a key component of our identity. It provides an important link to our history, our story, our spirituality. Our language is integral to our way of life and to our sovereign identity. Alarming, our language is in peril.

The Importance of the Meskwaki Language

For our people, the Meskwaki language is a gift from the Creator. We know that this language is the only language that our deities use. This is the language that our souls know—this is the language we are meant to use from the time we are born until we journey on to the next world. The Meskwaki language is central to our identity – it carries the most meaningful and deepest levels of our selves. It carries our spirituality, our religion, our connection to the Earth, and our connections beyond the continuums of time and space.

Our language provides an important connection to our Creator and to the other spirits we know. These connections must never be broken, as to be broken from those spirits is to experience the end of all things. Similarly, our connections to our past—our ancestors—and our future—our descendants—serves as another key tenet of our spirituality. Our language is a key tie that binds those connections for all time. The loss of our language threatens these sacred ties.

Even today, the Meskwaki culture permeates our daily life, from the food we eat, to hunting and gathering, to harvesting, clothing, and home making. Our games, songs, athletics, and dances incorporate our tribe's original cultural attributes. Our kinship system, a critical component of our way of life, is not anything like that of mainstream Western culture. To be a part of the Meskwaki tribe means being responsible to family and extended family, to the clans, the leadership systems, and the unique duties each of

these roles are given. Most important, all of our cultural attributes and the resulting thought processes, feelings and ideas are uniquely Meskwaki. As such, they cannot be equated or fully expressed in any language other than the Meskwaki language.

Languages vary from society to society, and often the meanings and implications of statements cannot be simply translated. When translations occur, critical knowledge and meaning becomes lost or lessened. These interruptions in the continuum of language, culture, spirituality, religion, and understandings cause disruptions in our social well-being. Our people have naturally suffered for generations from the unfortunate events in our history. The disconnection from culture, language, and spirituality makes recovery even more challenging for many of our people—as individuals, as families, and as a tribe.

For our nation to be successful, we must keep an open connection to our past, our future, our spiritual beliefs, and our cultural ways. Our tribe needs the freedom to remain who we are and preserve our identity. We hope to be afforded a chance for survival. But it will not be possible for the Meskwaki people to endure with broken pieces. Without our language and culture, we will perish.

Challenges to a Language-Based Curriculum

As a Tribe, we have prioritized the education of our young people as a critical piece of our strategic development. To this end we value bicultural education and intend to maintain high standards for the education and evaluation of our youth. We also intend to

implement proven research-based approaches on language and culturally-based learning in an effort to best position our students for success.

Since the early 1980s the Tribe has supported a language and culture program within school operations. However, the program remains more of a special activity than an essential element of our education curriculum or a tribe-wide mandate. We desire to apply a language and culturally-based curriculum on a much broader scale—along the lines that have been expressed by tribal people and educational professionals alike—so that our students may progress and perform at higher levels of academic achievement. Implementing this ambitious agenda, while critically important, remains difficult.

To this end, we have secured grant funding to develop a tribal-wide language preservation program. Our language coordinator has begun holding language roundtables three times a week—sessions that bring together Meskwaki speakers and learners. We have begun to develop technologies to support classroom instruction and independent studies. Still, additional training and support is needed to build the capacity to teach the Meskwaki language. As the tribe is the sole tribe in Iowa—and as Indigenous languages are particularly difficult to learn—language instruction proves especially challenging.

We must connect our tribal-wide language preservation program with our schools. This effort will prove especially challenging with the approximately 310 Meskwaki students that attend the public school system. However, the Committee could help remedy this

situation by supporting culturally-based education best practices and language immersion in early childhood education.

With regard to challenges to language programming, we have identified the following:

I. Timely Access to Supporting Information

Currently, there is helpful information available to tribes who are just starting out with building language revitalization programs. However, this trend of creating programs is still relatively new and is being enacted by tribes, who almost always have restricted resources. As a result, access to the most helpful information is limited. There is not an overabundance of information—and much of the information is not directly on point.

One must first locate the information, which is somewhat of a challenge when first starting out, and then the useful must be separated from the useless.

We believe funding allocated toward a centralized repository of knowledge—something analogous to the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development—would benefit all tribes, as tribes need their culture, language and identity as much, if not more, than economic development. Fact based material, proven methods and documented experience all in one central repository would both save time and money for all new and existing language programs.

The very nature of language loss essentially means that there is a limit in the number of years in which a solution can be completely implemented. Language loss can occur in little as one generation. The information that we need in order to be successful must be available to us immediately, it must be supported by evidence, and it must be reliable. Government support for a centralized repository for such research would be of great assistance to all tribes.

II. Funding for Tribal Language Programs

Language Revitalization is an expansive and expensive project that attempts to halt the shift away from the native language. Tribal Language Programs have dozens of initiatives that must be implemented in order to reestablish a safe state of the language and culture, including staffing, education, documentation, equipment, and teacher training. These initiatives require significant resources, resources that are too often lacking in tribal economies where scarce necessities such as clean water, access to health care, care for our elders, public safety and other essential services must take priority.

Staffing

Tribal language programs have myriad tasks to accomplish. Common goals necessary for success in any tribal language program include: Assessment of the Language (surveying or thinking groups), Documentation, Program Planning, Community Building, Teacher Training, Understanding Second Language Acquisition, and Establishing Educational Systems that include Cultural Standards and Culturally Based Curriculum. Many of these

tasks lend themselves to a standardized approach. By assuming a lead role in identifying the best practices in applicable areas, the Federal government could substantially lessen the burden of designing and implementing these initiatives. Moreover, as a repository of such practices, the government could provide training in order to establish and enhance Tribes capacities to successfully operate language preservation programs.

Education

Similarly, the federal government should assist tribes in establishing capacity in the areas of linguistics, data collection and analysis, language teaching, second language acquisition, community building and curriculum design to ensure an effective and focused approach to language preservation.

Documentation

Language Revitalization cannot have instantaneous results. Therefore, one key priority in all language programming must be to preserve the existing cultural knowledge. This preservation is referred to as Documentation. Language and Cultural Documentation is critical for future reference and often relies on the leadership of tribal elders.

Documentation as a linguistic data collection activity can take years. It can include thousands of pages of transcriptions, hundreds of hours of video and audio recording, dozens of hours of cataloguing, and ample media to collect and store such information. While documentation is time consuming, utilizing state of the art technologies can reduce the time and expense associated with these activities. The federal government should

work to ensure that Tribes have access to these technologies as well as to properly trained staff to provide support to these efforts.

Equipment

As noted above, a basic amount of equipment is necessary to accomplish many of the goals of language programming. Setting up a new department is difficult to fund, and modern equipment required for such things as Documentation can become costly.

Equipment needs include printing capabilities for large numbers of booklets, handouts, and awareness building materials for community building. Computers are required for daily tasks as well as long-term projects such as surveying, documentation, and training.

Native language teaching and learning materials are often made from scratch by program staff and language teachers. Creating language learning resources often requires the capabilities of creating graphics, printing large documents, and lamination or other finishing.

Training for Teachers

The skill set for teaching a language like Meskwaki to second language learners is not an innate ability, but rather a learned set of skills. Native language speakers must be trained in order to become successful teachers. Due to the unique methods of teaching Native languages, training often requires travel or immersion—which is not widely available in local areas.

III. Mandate State Support of Tribal Language Programming in Schools

In every state, teachers must meet certain requirements before being certified as a teacher, with good reason. However, in Indian Country these requirements may undermine the ability of schools to employ native fluent speakers as “teachers.” Too often, such native speakers receive lower pay and a lower status in the school as a result of the failure to meet certain requirements.

This poses a dilemma, as there are a limited number of speakers, and therefore there are only a limited number of people who can teach the native language. Moreover, the likelihood of a native fluent speaker pursuing a teaching certificate is significantly lowered by the aging population of fluent speakers and by the unique lifestyle and belief systems of tribal people.

Some states have passed amendments to allow for tribes to establish their own requirements for certifying a “Native Language Teacher.” This type of amendment must be made available for the benefit of every tribe. We recommend the Federal government mandate such a policy across the board. The presence of Native Language Teachers is essential to allowing the Native Languages to be taught to students.

For example, although the Settlement School seeks to employ Native Americans, primarily enrolled tribal members and descendants who are speakers and have knowledge of the Meskwaki culture, the “Highly Qualified” requirements in NCLB impede the ability to fill positions with Tribal members. If these “Highly Qualified” requirements are

not addressed, funding will be needed to send tribal members to school to seek further certification and to create a local certification and training program for Tribal and community members so that they can gain employment in the school and support our Meskwaki language and culture programs.

IV. Assistance and Support for Culture-Based Standards and Curriculum

We have a great need for educational standards and curriculums both in the school and our community. Standards would put into effect a minimum amount of tribal, traditional, linguistic, and cultural knowledge among each learner, each student, and each community member. This is an overwhelmingly enormous task that requires the involvement of traditional elders, experienced educators, and program planners. Tribes are short on the number of fluent speakers who are experienced in the areas of education, standards and curriculum design—let alone teaching language and culture in a classroom environment. Culture teachers are often not trained teachers, so they have limited access to courses and even less access to courses specific to Native language and culture instruction. We have found traditional methods are no longer effective enough to push and revitalize the language. Therefore, language and culture teachers need advanced and state-of-the-art training—training in research-based instructional practices and evidence-based practices like in differentiation of instruction and sheltered instructional practices.

History of the Meskwaki Language

As demonstrated below, the Meskwaki language is tied to and integral in the history and life of our Tribe and our Nation. Our language falls into the Algonquian language family, one of the five major language families into which the majority of North America's Indigenous languages can be categorized. Algonquian is not a tribal name or identification, but rather the name of the language family itself.

1800s – Reservation era: The federal government established the Sac and Fox Reservations in Kansas and Oklahoma. While some of our relatives went to the Sac and Fox reservations, a small bunch, refused to be placed on the reservations. This group of Meskwakis wished to settle and remain along the Iowa River—lands that more closely resembled the home we once had. The tribe gathered and pooled their resources to purchase its first 80 acres of land in 1856. By 1857 our agreement with the State of Iowa was firmly in place to be established as a tribal group, owning land in common. Each parcel of land was subsequently purchased with common funds. The land that was purchased was bought with the tribe's primary priority in mind—the well being and livelihood of our people. The purchase of land in common serves as evidence of our unity as a tribe, our sense of community, and our reliance upon one other for the benefit of the whole. Through this period, our language and cultural practices served as both unifying and motivating factors.

1880s – Emergence of the Written Meskwaki language: Earliest documented use of reading and writing.

1900s – Boarding Schools: Our people were subject to the boarding school era—many of our surviving elders were sent to boarding schools as children and forced to abandon their usage of the Meskwaki language. They were compelled to speak English and faced physical and verbal abuse for the use of the Native tongue. Despite this treatment, or perhaps in part because of it, the Meskwaki language remained a vibrant and integral part of our Tribal community.

1900s-Linguistic Studies: Franz Boas and Leonard Bloomfield, two of history’s most influential linguists, conducted some of the first—as well as the most important—studies on the various Algonquian languages, Meskwaki included. Their works serve as the baseline to any further study of Algonquian languages and have contributed substantial knowledge to the linguistic analysis of Meskwaki. In the early 1900’s a Meskwaki linguist by the name of William Jones, himself a disciple of Franz Boas, conducted further study on his language – advancing the understanding of the importance of the language relative to the Algonquian family. In furtherance of this work, the Bureau of American Ethnology commissioned a year-long study of Meskwaki language and culture, collecting thousands of pages of data on the Meskwaki language and way of life. These studies reflect the amount of interest in the Algonquin languages – particularly Meskwaki – and provide an important historical baseline.

1940s Language in Service of the United States – 16% of our Tribal members enlisted in the Army in the wake of Pearl Harbor. Ultimately 8 Members of the Tribe were

recognized by Congress for their contribution to the war effort as Code Talkers. Relying on our unique language, these Meskwaki helped successfully direct efforts against the Germans in North Africa.

1940s-1980s Infrastructure Enters the Meskwaki Lifestyle: The Meskwaki were self-sufficient and self-sustaining in the days of hunting and gathering and the days of freedom of migration. However, by purchasing our land in Iowa, and therefore committing to this location, we surrendered to the reality of our new lifestyle and its limitations. To gain water, food, materials, sanitation, housing, and other resources, increasingly we were forced to utilize the English language. As this increasing utilization of the English language grew, the tribe experienced, perhaps inevitably, a decrease in the use of Meskwaki.

1990-2000s- Linguistic Studies: A Growing Appreciation of the Meskwaki

Language: Many prominent contemporary linguists have conducted, and continue to conduct, analyses of the Meskwaki language. For many of these scholars, the Meskwaki language holds a special mystique among the Algonquian languages. In a 2008 Culture Symposium at the Meskwaki Settlement, Dr. Amy Dahlstrom explained the Meskwaki language's significance to linguists. Often linguists compare the distinct languages within a language family for their similarities in an effort to trace them back to the original language, or a "proto" language. Dr. Dahlstrom explained that of all Algonquin languages, the Meskwaki language is most similar to the Proto-Algonquian language. This implies that over the past 200 plus years of history, the Meskwaki language has

changed the least from its original form. So there lies special significance of this language as to why it didn't change, a particular link to our ancestors who spoke the Meskwaki language much as it is today, and important potential insights as to why other Algonquian languages deviated more from the original proto-language.

Conclusion

Like many of our fellow Tribes we have dedicated ourselves to preserving our language and our cultural heritage. In so doing, we seek to strengthen our spiritual connections to our Creator, to renew our ties to our ancestors and to provide this uniquely Meskwaki gift to our descendants. We believe these initiatives will strengthen our Tribal nation and enhance our ability to contribute to the American story as we have throughout our history. While the programs must be driven by Tribal leaders, we believe the federal government can play a meaningful and constructive role in their design and implementation. On behalf of the Meskwaki Tribe, thank you for the opportunity to present our thoughts in this regard.

This concludes my prepared statement. I welcome any questions you may have.