

**Written Testimony of
Henrietta Gomez, Taos Pueblo Head Start Program
Tiwa Culture Specialist and Language Instructor
before the
Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
on the
Reauthorization of the Head Start Act
and on
Native American Indian Language and Culture**

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Chairman Ben Nighthorse Campbell, Vice Chairman Daniel K. Inouye and members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, I appreciate the opportunity to submit this testimony in support of the recommendations of the National Indian Head Start Directors Association for amendments to the Head Start Act as it applies to the American Indian-Alaskan Native Head Start Programs. Among the proposed recommendations, are amendments that relate to Native American Language Preservation, an issue that I would like to focus on in this testimony.

In the early 1990's the U.S. Congress passed the Native Languages Act which recognized the unique status that Tribes hold in the United States as sovereign entities through treaties and acts of congress and the central importance of Native languages. Today as this committee reviews the Head Start Act, I hope it will once more reaffirm its commitment to Native people and the survival of their languages and cultures through careful and thoughtful consideration of each testimony that has been prepared and presented for your review.

The need for Native Language Survival

For indigenous people across this nation, the importance of issues related to language survival is inextricably entwined with cultural survival. The continuance of Native American cultural values, traditions, beliefs and governance systems is dependent on continued transmission and use of native spoken languages. Unfortunately, for many Native people this language preservation has been severely jeopardized by Federal policies that sought to destroy Native Language and culture. In particular, at one time, Federal educators argued that Native Americans must be moved into the mainstream and that the key to doing this was to separate Native children from their Native culture and language influences. The result was the notorious boarding school system which did so much harm to Indian country. These policies contributed directly to the endangered state of Native languages today. The survival of Native culture depends on the vitality of Native languages. Tragically, for 80% of North America's indigenous languages, the children are no longer learning their Native tongue. But it is not too late to turn this situation around!

Along with the loss of culture, language loss can destroy a sense of self-worth, limiting human potential, and complicating efforts to solve other problems, such as poverty, family breakdown, school failure and substance abuse. After all, language loss does not happen in privileged communities. It happens to the disposed and disenfranchised -- the people who most need their cultural resources to survive (Crawford 1994).

Even among Native communities where children are actively learning their native tongue, there are growing concerns about language survival and the need to take action. The uniqueness of Pueblo languages in my home State of New Mexico reflects a history of some of the oldest and longest sustained cultures in the nation. These languages have existed and still function primarily within a socio-cultural and socio-religious

community context (Blum, 2000; Sims, 2001; Suina, 1990}. As such, the oral tradition serves as the critical vehicle in which a community such as mine, Taos Pueblo, maintains its internal socio-cultural organization, its oral histories, cultural knowledge and spiritual way of life. To lose our Tiwa language would mean that everything that holds together our society would begin to unravel and would be lost to future generations.

The survival of the Tiwa language into the 21st Century is a testimony to the resilience and wisdom of our tribal elders and tribal leaders, who have steadfastly refused to abandon our language, despite overwhelming pressures in the last century to speak only English. Their legacy and the future of younger generations who will take their place as leaders will depend upon the steps we take today. AI-AN Head Start Programs that recognize the importance of Native culture and languages are better preparing Native youth for continuing higher education anywhere in this world and better preparing indigenous peoples as we take our rightful place in the world

For some tribes, there are now only a few speakers or even no speakers of their language left. In a response to this crisis, several tribes have made extraordinary efforts to stem the loss of language and therefore culture through community-based and school-based language efforts. In my small Pueblo of Taos, New Mexico, for instance the youngest generation of tribal members are beginning to relearn their native tongue, which until a few years ago remained viable only in age groups of thirty and older. Based on a Head Start Community Assessment, in 1998, Taos Pueblo developed a Tiwa Language Immersion Program (Red Willow Language Immersion Program) in the Taos Pueblo Head Start Program. Oral instruction in the native Tiwa language is provided for Head Start children. The Red Willow Language

Program has already begun to yield significant outcomes in children who are speaking the Tiwa language once more. They represent the future of young Native Americans who while maintaining a healthy connection to their communities are just as capable of as any child in America to succeed academically.

Our tribal community has benefitted from the Taos Pueblo Head Start language preservation efforts. Community members have input and influence regarding the curriculum. More native teachers have entered the Head Start Program as teachers, teacher assistants and in other leadership positions. The Head Start Program and the tribal community work together as a team to reclaim our native language.

Students have benefitted from language preservation. Head Start children in our language program have made smoother transitions into other schools. Being immersed in their native language has not delayed their academic development, but actually enhanced it. Their academic gains are sometimes greater than those in English-only classrooms. Attendance and parent participation have shown significant improvement. Native Language Immersion is more than words- it is a person's culture heritage, identity, and the way he or she is taught to view the world. Speaking and learning in more than one language enhances the development of cognition and should be viewed as desirable and be encouraged both at home and at school.

Native Language and Culture Curriculum is an Integral Part of the Whole Curriculum

Including Native language and culture in AI-AN Head Start Programs will help assure that indigenous children are educated in a culturally appropriate manner and be able to relate to the larger society from an

intact cultural perspective, not from a destroyed or distorted cultural perspective.

Native language programs in Head Start represents a Native adaptation of the ideal of education , for in Native culture, learning means the discovering of principles and the relations of everything. Integrating Native culture and language in AI-AN Head Start programs will contribute not only to the survival of Native society, but also to the survival of the world through Native contributions to the community of learning.

We do not believe that language and literacy activities geared toward English are the only meaningful ones in a classroom with students from a Native language background. The home languages and literacies of Native children can and should be incorporated into the classroom in ways that would be socially useful and cognitively challenging for the children. Inclusion of the home language and culture in the classroom curriculum allows Native children the opportunity to be the “experts” and builds pride in the languages and culture of their families. The inclusion of Native languages in the classroom is also cognitively challenging. The children will develop meta-linguistic awareness, the ability to think how language works, a skill that will help them in learning how to read and write in English. In an effort to ensure school readiness, we must make sure to leave intact and strengthen the paths to meaningful life connections to family and community.

Language and Culture –Essential Links

Economic:

- The ability to speak, read, and write more than one language is a great advantage in the job market.

Intellectual:

- Research shows that knowing more than one language increases thinking ability

Educational:

- Children who learn English and develop their native language do better in school than students who learn English at the expense of their first language.

Educational research has clearly established that Native culture and language are essential in Native children's acquisition of Knowledge and foster academic achievement" (T. Yazzie)

Sources:

- * Lipka, Mohatt, and the Cuilister Group, 1999
- * Skinner, 1999
- * Yazzie, 1999
- * Dupuis & Walker, 1998
- *Hakes & other. 1980
- * Mccarty., 1989
- * Mohatt& Sharp, 1998

Conclusion

For Native peoples language, culture, belief, governance, family and community are all closely inter-related. The loss of any one of these, is damaging to the others. I urge this Committee to support the use of Native language and culture in the Indian Head Start program.