

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
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NATIONAL INDIAN HEAD START DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION
AND
DIRECTOR OF THE NEZ PERCE TRIBE HEAD START PROGRAM,
LAPWAI, IDAHO
ON THE REAUTHORIZATION OF THE HEAD START ACT
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
SEPTEMBER 25, 2003**

Introduction. I am here today to represent Head Start and Early Head Start Programs in Indian Country and to talk about the relevance and importance of distance learning for these programs. In my experience, as the Director of the Nez Perce Head Start Program, distance learning can successfully bridge the resource gap experienced by nearly all rurally located Indian tribes. To do this, Indian Country has already begun developing collaborations to utilize distance learning, especially for professional development purposes.

Indian Country does not have a cadre of people prepared to enter the work force. Rather the work force consists of parents with children. Unfortunately, all too often they lack the skills needed, or are entering the work force for the first time, or do not have a high school diploma, or are working to get their GED, etc. So what do we do? We have to become creative and innovative while developing practical attainable professional development training plans to meet the needs of staff, the tribal government and the federal government. Thus the role of technology allows programs to develop training activities and opportunities for our children, families and communities.

Since 1994, when new academic requirements were added to the Head Start Act, Tribes have had to collaborate, create and develop systems to meet these requirements. In doing so, they have had to address the difficulty of being located far from major educational institutions. One way we have dealt with this challenge has been through distance learning. While distance learning is relatively new to early childhood programs in Indian Country, I am happy to report that it is up and running!

Distance Learning - High Technology that Preserves Tribal Culture. Tribes seek to provide ways for their people to get degrees without having to leave the reservation. They do this, in part, to preserve tribal culture by keeping people at “home” on the reservation. Indeed, “the refusal to abandon culture is perhaps one of the most poignant rationales for the use of distance education by Native populations.” (Berg and Ohl 1991).

For Head Start programs, distance learning permits relatively easy access to quality professional development training programs for our staff. We should not forget that our staff often pursue these degrees while working full-time and raising a family! Of course, distance learning not only allows Tribes to offer opportunities to tribal members, but also to their work force, including non-Indians. It is a tool

that works for everyone - tribal governments, employees of the Tribe and communities residing within a reservation. Through distance learning, American Indian Tribes can still learn from Western education while remaining in an environment which teaches what Vine Deloria, Jr. calls the “traditional technologies or the practices and beliefs of Native American peoples.” (Deloria 1990).

Indian Country has several notable successes in the distance learning area. For example, the Northwest Indian College (NWIC) in Bellingham, Washington, entered into a distance learning agreement with the Nez Perce Tribe in 2000. Distance learning services were provided beginning in 2001. By 2002, the College and the Tribe had entered into a Memorandum-of-Agreement (MOA) to provide early childhood education services to the Nez Perce Tribe Early Childhood Development Program. Under the terms of the MOA, the College and the Nez Perce Nation agreed to collaborate to provide on-reservation post-secondary education and training consistent with the needs and interests of the Nez Perce Tribe. The MOA outlines goals specifically related to the Head Start Act. This Collaboration Agreement confirms a shared commitment to helping individuals gain self-sufficiency in a rapidly changing technological world while recognizing and nurturing their cultural identity. It is focused on improving the quality of life on the Nez Perce reservation through education, training and economic development. This effort has been very successful, not only for our early childhood staff, but also for employees of the Nez Perce Tribe and communities within the reservation.

There are several other successful distance education programs in Indian Country. The University of Alaska and the Yugtarvik Museum Project have provided college courses to students at remote locations, primarily through audio conferences. (Sponder and Schall 1990). One-quarter of Alaska’s rural population is Native Alaskan; most Alaskan communities are not accessible by road. Fortunately, satellite technology has enabled Alaska to develop a strong tele-communication infrastructure that makes this program possible. Similarly, in February of 1990, Northern Arizona and the Navajo Nation reached a distance learning agreement whose goal is to develop programs aimed at increasing the quality of educational delivery and level of academic achievement of Navajo students from kindergarten through post secondary education. (Stern 1990).

Even though distance learning has been successful, it is costly to develop and implement. Several cost components factor into the design of a distance education system. They are:

- **Technology** – hardware (e.g., videotape players, cameras) and software (e.g., computer programs).
- **Transmission** – the on-going expense of leasing or buying transmission access (e.g., T-1 line, satellite, microwave).
- **Maintenance** – repairing and updating equipment.
- **Infrastructure** – the foundational network and telecommunications infrastructure located at the originating and receiving campuses.
- **Production** – technological and personnel support required to develop and adapt teaching materials.
- **Support** – miscellaneous expenses needed to ensure the system works successfully including administrative costs, registration, advising/counseling, local support costs, facilities and overhead costs.

- **Personnel** – to staff all functions previously described.

Although high, the costs of distance learning are truly outweighed by the benefits.

Collaboration is the key. For Indian Country, collaboration is not an option, it is a necessity and, fortunately, it exists. One successful collaborative effort is that between the Head Start Programs and the American Indian Higher Education Consortium – Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCU's). There are thirty two (32) accredited tribal colleges and universities that offer early childhood education programs. This Consortium of colleges and universities provides much needed technological access and capabilities for Tribes across the nation. Tribal colleges and universities were created by Indians for Indians primarily on rural and remote Indian reservations. They understand the challenges faced by tribes and are, therefore, the logical place from which to build distance learning programs. We urge Congress to continue to support programs through these institutions.

Collaboration Lead to an Extraordinary Success at the Nez Perce Tribe. One of the proposed Head Start bills states “that each Head Start agency would be required to coordinate and collaborate with the local education agency serving the communities involved to ensure curriculum and classroom experiences for Head Start are aligned with the cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills that children entering kindergarten are expected to demonstrate.” The Nez Perce Tribe Head Start Program, through collaboration with its local school district and with the distance learning support it has received from the Northwest Indian College, has seen its children achieve extraordinary results on the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI) for students who entered kindergarten after attending our Head Start program. The skills for the Idaho Reading Indication are:

- 1) Write own name,
- 2) Detect rhyme,
- 3) Detect syllables and
- 4) Identify uppercase letters

In 1999, just 19% of our children tested above grade level on this test. I am proud to report that in 2002, 49% of our children tested above grade level! This is extraordinary progress in three (3) years, and is directly attributable to the impact of our Early Head Start and Head Start programs, working in collaboration with local school districts and with distance learning institutions!

Early Head Start works. Our experience at Nez Perce demonstrates that not only does Head Start work, but it works even better when combined with Early Head Start. A birth to age 5 holistic approach is very effective. I urge this committee to support establishing a separate set-aside for Early Head Start, similar to that provided for Head Start, for Indian tribes so that we have a stable source of funding and do not have to compete with non-Indian programs whose circumstances are so different from our own.

Professional development can be achieved but requires financial and administrative support. To meet any mandates, funding must be assured to programs. The support system for Training and Technical Assistance and Disabilities has been dismantled. The new technical assistance system began September 1, 2003 according to an Information Alert but is not operational as contact has not occurred with programs

in the field. It is not known how or when the new system will begin to assist programs.

NIHSDA strongly supports:

- Amending the Head Start Act to provide grants to Tribal Colleges and Universities to increase the number of post-secondary degree in early childhood education and related fields earned by Indian Head Start agency staff members, parents of children served by such an agency and members of the community involved.
- Increased funding for Indian Head Start Early Childhood Services, birth to 5 years of age. As shown in the Idaho Reading Indicator, the holistic approach offered by Tribes when they are afforded the opportunity to operate both Early Head Start, Head Start and Child Care programs collaboratively.
- Collaboration with local school districts but the distinction between the programs must be maintained for Tribes to operate their own programs.
- Increased funding to retain and recruit staff.

Conclusion. Distance learning education works even though it "...counters the trend of centralized, norm-minded, teacher oriented pedagogy..." (Berg and Ohler 1991)! Distance learning is an effective learning tool for Tribes and as such Congress should support adequate funding for Indian Head Start Programs to utilize distance learning programs.