

Senate Bill 2688
Demmert 7/17/00

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON
INDIAN AFFAIRS FOR SENATE BILL 2688

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to comment on Native American Languages Act Amendments Act (Senate Bill 2688).

I wish to testify in support of the proposed legislation, for it is unique in what it provides support for, and will present some personal experiences about why I believe S. 2688 is so important.

I started teaching school in 1960 in a small district in Forks, Washington, on the west coast of the Olympic Peninsula in the State of Washington. I was hired, in part, because I was an American Indian and because the school served La Push Indian reservation students. The superintendent of the school (Mr. Hitchcock) recognized that the reservation students were not being served well by the school as evidenced by the fact that no La Push student had graduated from high school for years – all had left school by the end of the junior highschool year or soon thereafter.

This superintendent was ahead of his contemporaries for he recognized that the school and curriculum had to change if the school district was to meet the academic needs of the La Push students, if the school was to become successful in holding the students long enough to graduate from high school, and if the school was going to challenge these students to pursue higher levels of education.

The first step undertaken to change the culture of the school was to hire two Native teachers in the elementary school and eventually move one of us into the middle and high school as the La Push students moved through the grades. The second strategy was to encourage greater after school participation in extra curricular school activity (i.e., band, various sporting activities, and other social events).

Those simple changes began to have an affect because before I left Forks to work on an advanced degree, and to teach in the State of Alaska, one student graduated, there now were several students in high school, and only one student left school before graduation.

In 1988 I had an opportunity to serve as the chief school administrator (principal/superintendent) for the small school in the village where I was born (March 9, 1934). The school, located in Klawock, Alaska, had once been a Bureau of Indian Affairs school, a territorial school, and a village public school for grades k – 8 (the graduates attended BIA boarding schools in the lower 48, Mt. Edgecumbe high school located in Sitka, Alaska; Sheldon Jackson High school in Sitka; or the public school in a near by community connected by road, called Craig which by then had a high school. The school was relatively successful but a relatively high number of students left school before graduation from high school at the time and returned home.

In the two years I spent as the chief school administrator in Klawock we significantly changed the curriculum and culture of the school. These changes included the following:

- 1) Two Native Alaskan teachers were hired from the community (there had been none for several years);
- 2) Six local residents were brought into the school (one for each classroom <k-1, 2-3, 3-4, 5-6, & 7-8>), with a substitute available to fill in when there was an absence) trained as teacher aides, and placed into a teacher education program (three of them became teachers and worked locally until they retired);
- 3) We brought three respected elders from the community into the classrooms to teach the Tlingit language, present oral histories and mythology of the Tlingit, and offered the students opportunities to learn and practice the fine arts that represented their clan and community (music, visual arts, and theater);
- 4) We took the students out into the community and organized the classes around projects and activity occurring in the community or around the natural environment (i.e., using the beaches and what grew there for a starting place to learn science);
- 5) We offered extra-curricular activities for ALL students that focused on kinesthetic activity for all, and on a school wide program, that presented to the community at the end of the year, all of those culturally related activities the students had learned during the school year;
- 6) We offered an evening program that included all interested parents and students and that provided an opportunity to practice their fine arts skills, their singing and traditional dancing, and design and construction of traditional dress in preparation for the end of year school wide presentation.

The Postmistress (a prominent elder in the community) asked me what we were doing in the school. She told me that in all the years she has served as the Postmistress she watched the students every year walk to school and play along the way killing time until the last bell rang at 9:00 a.m. at which time they would finally continue on to school. She now observed them going to school early, often before the school doors opened, and they no longer lingered enroute. She indicated that the students appeared eager to get to school.

All of the students in that grade school completed the eight grade, moved into the high school in the near by community, and all but one or two of those students completed high school. The high school was organized to continue the language and cultural activity throughout the students' four years of high school and was instrumental in keeping them motivated and in school.

Those experiences and what I learned as a teacher, principal, and superintendent were key to what I attempted to incorporate in future activity as the 1st U.S. Deputy Commissioner of Indian Education in the U.S. Office of Education, a position created by the original Indian Education Act of 1972; in what I learned as the Director of the Office of Indian Education Programs in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Department of Interior when I served in that capacity; in what I learned as the Commissioner of Education for the State of Alaska; and in what I learned as the chairman of an international steering committee that works with all of the Ministries of Education in the Circumpolar North (Russia, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Greenland, Alaska, and the Canadian provinces or territories of Quebec, Northwest Territories, and the Yukon Territory).

I have learned a most important principle from all of those experiences and that is: In order for schools to become significantly more successful in educating higher percentages of Native students the school must create a challenging curriculum in the context of the language, culture, and educational priorities of the community served, using local and traditional knowledge as a base from which to start the formal educational process.

The examples that support this conclusion are not many for most systems will not or are not able to adjust sufficiently enough to do this successfully, but the examples that I am familiar with are

conclusive (e.g., Punana Leo in Hawaii, Kativik Schools in Northern Quebec, Sami language schools in northern Norway, Greenlandic schools, Craig & Klawock Public Schools in Alaska).

As a member of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future a second principle has emerged that tells me teachers are critical to improving schools and schooling. My experience in Klawock and international activity, also tell me that the inclusion of Native teachers influence change in the culture of the school for a variety of reasons including expectations, perspectives of the curriculum taught, modeling, and levels of understanding communication and cultural subtleties. I recognize the influence a teacher has on students when that teacher understands the language, the culture, the pedagogy, cognitive development, and is able to communicate effectively with parents and students alike.

Finally, current research on cognitive development (on how the brain works and the influences of kinesthetic activity and high quality personal experiences of the child) reinforce the importance of early childhood programs that focus on language development, kinesthetic activity, social and cultural development, and on the physical and mental health of the child.

What does all this have to do with Senate Bill 2688?

Regular Bureau of Indian Affairs schools and regular public schools serving Native students find it very difficult, if not impossible for political or other purposes, to build comprehensive educational programs and schools that build partnerships with early childhood programs and that build a language and cultural curriculum that reflects the community served, an important characteristic is that school is to make a difference and motivate and challenge each student to learn.

Senate Bill 2688 will provide select communities and schools opportunities to create school partnerships and environments that take current research and knowledge into account and that build schools that are created in the context of the language, culture and educational priorities of the community served and that use local and traditional knowledge as a base from which to start – a principle of effective schools serving Native communities in the U.S. and internationally among Native or indigenous communities.

I urge passage of this new and innovative legislation and wish to thank you for the chance to testify.

William G. Demmert, Jr., Ed.D., Professor of Education, Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington