

I am deeply gratified that the Committee on Indian Affairs has called for a hearing on S. 2688 to receive testimony on the establishment of Native American Language Survival Schools. It conveys to me that members of this Committee, and I would hope Congress as well, are attuned to the needs and desires of their Native American and Native Hawaiian constituents. We are indeed committed to ensuring the perpetuation of our indigenous languages for they embody the essence of who we are as a people and they offer the means to regain our social health and allow us to attain multi-cultural harmony. This Hearing is also significant in that it gives affirmation to the value of cultural and linguistic diversity at a time in our history when once again assimilative forces loom within our nation that seek to eradicate cultural and linguistic diversity and to homogenize the American population into that of the dominant society.

For the record, my name is Rosita Worl. I am bound by our own Tlingit cultural protocols to share with you who I am in our society. My name is Yeidiklats'ok, I am a Chilkat Eagle and a member of the Thunderbird Clan from the House Lowered From the Sun in Klukwan. I serve as President of the Sealaska Heritage Foundation and as a professor of anthropology at the University of Alaska Southeast. I also appear here today representing the Alaska Federation of Natives. I am a member of the Board of Directors that is comprised of representatives from thirteen regional

Native corporations, twelve regional non-profit and tribal organizations, and twelve village corporations and tribes. These directors collectively represent 100,000 Alaska Natives. During AFN's annual meetings, approximately 90 percent of the eligible membership are represented and act on resolutions before them. One of the consistent themes contained in the resolutions adopted over the years by the affiliated Elders and Youth Conferences, and the AFN convention itself, relates to directives supporting the survival and perpetuation of Native languages.

My testimony in favor of amending the Native American Languages Act to provide for the authority for the establishment of Native American Language Survival Schools arises from a multi-year study process initiated and conducted by AFN in which I also participated as a member of the Planning Committee. It is likewise based on my own work in Southeast Alaska at Sealaska and the University.

In response to AFN's publication of the "Report on the Status of Alaska Natives: Call for Action," which outlined the dismal state of affairs among Alaska Natives and Native communities, Congress created the Alaska Native Commission. It was directed to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the social, cultural, and economic conditions of Alaska Natives. In addition to the Commission's research,

extensive hearings were held throughout all regions of Alaska, and a three volume report on the conditions of Alaska Natives was published in 1994. Almost immediately, AFN embarked on a process to develop recommendations and solutions to the problems identified by the Commission report. This effort culminated with the submission of a report to Congress in December 1999, which outlined the actions necessary to implement the recommendations of the Alaska Native Commission.

The Alaska Native Commission and the subsequent AFN reports to Congress contain recommendations to improve the quality of education of young Alaska Natives and to reverse the deterioration of the socioeconomic conditions and the poor educational performances of most Alaska Native children. One of the most specific recommendations---that I cite today in endorsing the amendment to establish Native American Language Survival Schools---calls for the support of Native language revitalization and language immersions efforts.

I think it is also germane that I outline the basic propositions contained in the AFN report in regards to the administration of educational systems. I urge the Committee to consider them in developing the specific provisions of the proposed amendment.

Foremost is Native control of their own educational systems and programs, coupled with adequate funding. AFN supports direct grants to Alaska Native entities, acting alone or in partnerships with other school or university systems, rather than channeling funds through the Department of Education. This recommendation is premised on the presumption of maximizing the funds and ensuring its direct dedication to Native education. A common perception in the Native community, and perhaps in reality, is the practice of allocating funds to non-Native controlled educational systems and then diverting the funds to support programs that primarily serve the interest of non-Natives rather than the intended Native people or programs.

The other two AFN recommendations, which I am certain members of this Committee have heard many times, advocate for the employment of Native teachers and administrators and non-Native people who are knowledgeable and respectful of Native people and their cultures. Finally Native people remain adamant that educational systems must implement an integrated approach that provides the skills needed to live in the broader and larger society and incorporates the cultural values and languages of their societies.

Now if I may, I would like to shift my discussion to Southeast Alaska where the state of affairs are that the indigenous languages are dying. Sealaska represents approximately 30,000 Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian with the predominant population being Tlingit. We are dispersed throughout fifteen communities in Southeast Alaska and have large population concentrations in Anchorage, Seattle and the San Francisco Bay areas with whom we maintain regular communication and interaction including that of our language revitalization efforts. Our history is similar with that of our Native American and Hawaiian brothers and sisters in that our language was repressed and children were removed from their homes and punished for speaking their Native languages. Today our children no longer speak their Native languages, and the youngest speakers are in the age range of mid-fifties to 60 years of age.

Because we see the basis of our survival in the ways of our ancestors, the Foundation adopted language revitalization as its foremost priority and formulated two clear objectives which we presume to be interrelated: Native language acquisition and revitalization and the academic success and enrichment of our Native students. I will not cite the litany of academic failures that characterize the general educational performance of Native students nor the failure of school

systems, which ignore our cultural heritage and language, to provide adequate education to our young that, in part, led us to our position and on our journey.

I note for the Committee that three years ago the Board of Trustees of the Sealaska Heritage Foundation learned of the Hawaiian language revitalization effort. We visited several Hawaiian programs and returned home hopeful that we might be able to replicate their success.

We dedicated our limited resources to language revitalization. Now in beginning our third year, we are sponsoring or supporting: pre-school language programs in two communities, summer language camps in seven communities, a summer language institute for seventy-five master speakers and apprentices, and a less than adequate development of language curriculum. Because we have more than 2,000 registered dancers in 46 dance groups, and view family and community based activities as essential to language acquisition, we began transcribing and translating clan songs that we intend to copyright to the clans, publish and disseminate. We developed a partnership with the University of Alaska Southeast and began language classes, and later, the summer institute. We secured federal funds (though none under the Native American Language Act) to begin bilingual-bicultural teacher

training, a kindergarten through 2nd grade language demonstration project, and curriculum project in partnership with two of our school districts and the University of Alaska Southeast.

Last year, one of our fifteen communities petitioned its school district to establish a charter school that would focus on Native language and culture. We were not successful in that effort, and we were left with the distinct impression that the school district did not support charter schools.

After assessing our progress and visiting the Hawaiian programs again, we came to the conclusion that we must establish schools that are dedicated to the teaching of our Native language along with our efforts to promote intergenerational language acquisition within our homes and communities. We were elated when we learned that this Committee was holding this hearing on a proposed amendment to establish Native American Language Survival Schools. Sealaska wholeheartedly supports this amendment.

With that strong endorsement, I will reiterate the basic propositions adopted by the Alaska Federation of Natives that we view as necessary to advance educational

success: Native control of the academic institutions that serve our communities and control of the allocation of funds; support for the training and retention of Native teachers and other individuals who have received special cross-cultural instruction; adequate funding to support all basic elements necessary to support Native language acquisition and revitalization including the administration and operation of the schools, teacher training, curriculum development and mechanisms and financial support for parental and community involvement.

I cannot stress enough the need for adequate funding. There is no doubt that to operate Language Survival Schools in Southeast Alaska will be costly. We have fewer than 50 certified Native teachers in our Southeast Alaskan schools, none of whom speak Tlingit, Haida or Tsimshian. A team-teaching approach will need to be developed and supported with the addition of Tlingit-speaking teachers, many of whom are learned in our traditional ways, but who lack college degrees. For our circumstances, we would propose provisions that allow for the gradual increase in the percentage of time for Native language instruction. Of course, the amendment must provide funds and time for the planning phase to begin operation of these schools. The Language Survival Schools must have the financial support and means to succeed, otherwise we will forever be told that the Native Language Schools do

not result in academic achievement.

I would also urge the Committee to allow for the development of a regional approach coinciding with the indigenous language base rather than limiting the funds to a single school site. We have developed a regional strategic approach to our language revitalization efforts, but we are confronted with the necessity of meshing and integrating available funding sources to meet our needs and provide services to our multiple communities. Half of our communities are predominantly Native, while the other half are mixed communities in which our Native populations are a minority. We would be initially content to have a demonstration school in our region, but we would implore the Committee to consider ways in which schools or programs in other communities might benefit from this effort.

I would further propose that the Native American Language Survival Schools be extended to include pre-school age children. I also recommend that provision be adopted that allow for the partnership or participation of Head Start participants. The Native American Language Survival Schools must not be based on financial need or available only for the impoverished. If they are to succeed and to be accepted in our society, Native language must not be associated solely with the

economically impoverished.

We believe that the collective wisdom of our ancestors and the beauty of culture holds our promise for the future. We firmly believe that Native students who know and accept who they are, even in the context of living in a society that devalues Nativeness or cultural and physical differences, will succeed academically, emotionally and socially. The transmission of our culture and language is the key to our survival and success.

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United States Senate
Committee on Indian Affairs

Hearings On

S. 2688 To Amend the
Native American Languages Act
To Provide Authority for the Establishment of
Native American Language Survival Schools

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July 20, 2000

