

Statement Presented by Alfred Trepania, President, The Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council to the Senate Indian Affairs Committee

Education Issues – June 19, 2001

Thank you for the opportunity to present this statement. My name is Alfred Trepania. I am the President of The Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council.

For the tribal nations represented by The Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council, education remains our strongest hope for strengthening our capacities to address the serious issues, which our communities must face. For our tribes, education also remains our strongest hope for sustaining our values, language, traditional knowledge, and our understanding of the place of humans in the natural world.

Many of our educational institutions – tribal schools, charter schools, and tribal colleges – are working to prepare for our future by building on our rich cultural and intellectual inheritance. This approach is gradually yielding some successes:

- Over time, the success rates of Indian students attending tribal schools are increasing.
- Students who have dropped out are returning in increasing numbers to obtain their high school diplomas.
- During their years in school, more and more Indian students are becoming computer-literate, participating in science fairs, and enjoying courses in field biology and other natural sciences.

These successes, in turn, are helping our communities to prepare for the next set of challenges we must address. Our tribal economies depend to a great extent on tourism and the careful management of natural resources. Our daily lives depend on good transportation linkages, safe drinking water, and on dependable supplies of fuels and electrical power. Many of our tribal members rely on fish and wild game for significant parts of their diet.

But the balances of nature in the Great Lakes region are shifting in some cases dramatically. These changes, in turn, affect our economies and our daily lives. Declines in the water level of Lake Superior affect pollution levels and access to transportation. Declines in annual snowfall affect winter recreation, alter the water table, and may soon affect fish and wildlife populations. Increasing temperatures affect our forests and agriculture, open our natural environments to invasions of new species, and may begin to affect the health of our elders and other vulnerable groups. And the increasing frequency of intense storms, wide swings in temperature, and other dramatic weather events affects our community infrastructure -water supplies, roads, sewage treatment facilities, and electrical power.

Education is one way in which our communities are preparing to address the issues created by these changes. Tribal colleges in the Great Lakes region are building strong programs

in the biological sciences, forestry, and natural resource management. The College of the Menominee Nation offers a degree program in forestry, which is based in the detailed knowledge of local environments, which the Menominee Nation has acquired through a numerous years of successful forest management in the same location. This knowledge, and the values on which this success is based, are combined with contemporary scientific analyses and management approaches. This combination of traditional knowledge and values with contemporary science strengthens the Menominee Nation's abilities to adapt successfully to rapid environmental and economic changes.

Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community College has developed a strong educational program, which uses contemporary geographic information systems technology to assist the tribe in mapping and analyzing reservation resources in close detail. This same technology has contributed to the development of a successful rural transportation system, which serves the entire tribal community.

The tribal colleges in the Great Lakes region contribute to their communities in other ways as well. Tribal college faculty serves as judges for local science fairs. Students from local high schools take tribal college courses even as they are still completing their high school years. Summer programs offer special training for younger students, and likewise give them a chance to participate in life on a tribal college campus. Tribal college faculty and staff frequently provide technical assistance to agencies and programs of tribal governments. The libraries of tribal colleges are frequently the only libraries available to most reservation residents. And a recent study by the American Indian Higher Education Consortium indicates that tribal communities with tribal colleges have higher work-force participation rates than comparable tribal communities that lack their own colleges.

With all of these success stories, however, we still have a long way to go. Tribal schools need to slow down the turnover rates for faculty and administrators. The schools need qualified science teachers, and teachers who understand and communicate the values of the tribal communities they serve. The urgent needs for large numbers of Native teachers have still not been addressed. Tribal schools need resources for science labs and library resources. The schools need resources to offer innovative programs after school and in summers to reinforce the astonishing talents and gifts of their students.

Tribal colleges likewise need assistance. Education and research programs in the natural and environmental sciences are expensive they require faculty with appropriate degrees and qualifications, libraries with access to appropriate journals and reference materials, and laboratories and field sites with appropriate equipment. Yet tribal colleges continue to receive basic operating funds from the federal government at a rate of less than half the dollars, per student, that states provide to their own two-year colleges, and much less than the amounts provided to four-year institutions.

Education is important to our tribes. Our students are eager to succeed. We request, therefore, that you examine both our successes and our needs. We request that you provide us with the support we require to continue to develop educational institutions of the depth and quality, which our communities need, and our students deserve. We, like you, intend to leave no

child behind – and we expect and intend to leave no adult or tribal community behind. We have already accomplished much; we request your help in doing much more.