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S. 2688 – the Native American Languages Act Amendments Act of 2000

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am pleased to be here to discuss the importance of preserving Native American Languages and the Administration's views on S. 2688, the Native American Languages Act Amendments Act of 2000.

Preserving Native American languages is important for many reasons, including the contribution this can make to improving education for Native American students. Overall, the educational performance of Native American students lags significantly behind the performance of their peers nationwide. Only 48 percent of American Indian fourth graders scored "at or above the basic level" on the 1994 NAEP reading assessment, as compared to 60 percent of all fourth graders nationwide. Low achievement levels, in turn, are matched by high dropout rates. The annual high school dropout rate for American Indian teenagers (5.9 percent) in 1996-7 was nearly twice the national average (3.2 percent).

The achievement gap that exists between Native American and non-Native American students is influenced by a number of factors, including inadequate school resources, high rates of family poverty, and high student absenteeism. In addition, Native American cultures and languages are often undervalued in schools serving Native American students, causing these young people to feel disconnected from their heritage. We know from research and experience that individuals who are strongly rooted in their past – who know where they come from – are often best equipped to face the future.

That is why preserving Native American languages is so crucial – to better connect Native American students to their own past, and to help better prepare them for a future in which education and learning are more important than ever.

As you know, U.S. Education Secretary Richard W. Riley has proposed expanding the number of schools that enable students to be educated in English and their native language, otherwise known as dual language schools. In a speech this past March, Secretary Riley called for increasing the number of dual language schools from 260 today to 1,000 by the year 2005.

The Clinton Administration has been a strong supporter of improving educational opportunities for all Americans, and Native American students in particular. In fiscal year 2001, President Clinton requested \$1.2 billion dollars in additional funding for new and existing programs across the Federal government designed to serve Native-Americans.

I am extremely pleased that the Senate – through its current appropriations bill – has proposed funding levels for three Administration program priorities that are identical to

amounts requested in the President's 2001 budget: Indian Education Grants to Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) (\$92.8 million), the American Indian Teacher Corps (\$10 million), and a new American Indian Administrator Corps (\$5 million). The Administration is encouraged that the House has matched your commitment level for grants to LEAs and the Teacher Corps, and hope that they will provide funding for the new Administrator Corps program.

President Clinton has also proposed \$1.3 billion for a new School Renovation Loan and Grant program, which includes \$50 million targeted directly to Impact Aid school districts that have at least 50 percent of their children residing on Indian lands. Unfortunately, both the House and Senate bills reported out of the Appropriations Committee this May provide no funding for this initiative. The Senate bill potentially does allocate some funding that could be used for school modernization and repairs, which is a step in the right direction. However, the Senate bill would consolidate under a block grant two of our most important national priorities – school construction and class size reduction – with no assurances that the funds would be used for either purpose.

In addition, the Administration has proposed \$460 million for the Bilingual Education programs funded under Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Many Title VII grantees provide educational services to schools serving Native American students. The Senate and House levels for Title VII fall \$17 million and \$54 million below the President's request, respectively. We look forward to working with members of this Committee and others in Congress to secure funding for these and other crucial programs for Native American students.

The Challenge: Preserving Native Languages

American Indians, Alaskan Natives, Native Hawaiians, and Native American Pacific Islanders are faced with the growing challenge of preventing the loss of their native languages. Michael Krauss of the Linguistic Society of America estimates that of the 175 indigenous languages still spoken in the United States, ninety percent are at-risk of extinction. For example, of the 20 native languages still spoken in Alaska, only Central Yupik and St. Lawrence Island Yupik are being passed on to the next generation.

Many of those languages not currently seen by linguists to be in immediate danger of extinction are projected to reach this status in the future. Even among the Navajo tribe, the single largest American Indian community in the United States, the number of tribal members who speak Navajo is decreasing annually. According to U.S. Census data, the number of Navajos living on their reservation – age five or older – who speak only English nearly doubled between 1980 (7.2 percent) and 1990 (15.0 percent).

In the past, the Federal government promoted policies that worked to undermine the survival of Native American languages. Starting in the 1880s, many Native Americans were educated in schools where they were punished for speaking their native language. Albert Kneale – a teacher at a Native American boarding school in the early 1900s –

explained that in the schools, “children were taught to despise every custom of their forefathers, including religion, language, songs, dress, ideas, (and) methods of living.” In a recent interview, one elderly Native American woman – Celene Not Help Him – recalled the punishment she received for speaking in her native language as a schoolgirl in the 1930s: “We talk Indian in the classroom, they’ll . . . bend a ruler and hit you in the mouth.” Unfortunately, we are still living with the consequences of these policies.

However, more recently, Congress has established a government grant policy aimed at preventing further Native American language extinction. The Native American Languages Act of 1990 declared it “the official policy of the United States government to preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native languages.”

The Native American Languages Act was amended in 1992 to establish a grant program under the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to support native language projects. The Administration for Native Americans (ANA) – part of HHS – has funded grants to tribal governments and Native Hawaiian groups since 1994. ANA funds projects in language immersion, curriculum development, and development of language dictionaries and CD-ROMS. Since 1994, ANA has funded 166 awards for a total of \$12.1 million.

The Department of Education has also provided funding to strengthen students’ native language skills under our Bilingual Education Program. The statutory language in Title VII of ESEA currently supports funding for bilingual education programs that “may also develop the native language skills of limited English proficient students, or ancestral languages of American Indians, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians and the residents of the outlying areas.”

Currently, 64 separate Title VII grants provide over \$6 million in funding annually to schools and school districts serving American Indians, Alaskan Natives, Native Hawaiians, and Native American Pacific Islanders.

Through a Title VII grant, the Department of Education has provided funding for a professional development, distance-learning project based at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff involving seven Navajo Nation school districts. Through this Title VII Teacher and Personnel grant, university faculty, masters fellows, and mentor K-12 teachers are collaborating over a five-year period to increase the ability of Navajo teachers to provide high-quality education to Native American students.

In addition, the Department of Education has provided nearly \$800,000 in FY1999 and FY2000 through the Native Hawaiian Education Act (ESEA, Title IX, Part B) for the development of K-12 audio-visual and computer curricula for the statewide Hawaiian Medium education program. The videos developed through this grant cover topics such as grammar, and cultural traditions, while one of the CDs is a compilation of Native Hawaiian songs. The grant was awarded to Aha Punana Leo, Inc. in Hawaii, one of the organizations testifying before this committee today.

The Education Department's Public Charter Schools program, which helps finance the design and start-up of more than 1000 charter schools nationwide, has also helped promote education in Native American language and culture. Located on the Navajo Nation, the Tolani Lake Elementary School will receive \$300,000 in funding over a two-year period beginning in FY2000 to support a learning environment grounded in traditional Navajo culture. Classes in Navajo language and culture will be offered at each grade level. Community leaders will serve as tutors, mentors, and counselors for the students in this predominantly Navajo school.

Specific Comments on S. 2688

Despite these important efforts, there is still more to be done. That is why we support the goal and intent of the proposed Native American Language Act Amendments Act of 2000, as well as the overall approach of providing funding to schools that will intensively educate students in Native American languages. However, there are some areas of S. 2688 that are problematic and could, we believe, be strengthened. We look forward to working with this committee in attempt to address these issues. Let me briefly discuss some of the chief concerns.

Instruction in Native languages and English, and High Standards. The Native American Language Act Amendments Act would provide funding to Native American Survival Schools to promote student acquisition of their native language. It would require that schools provide at least 20 hours per week of instruction and not less than 35 weeks per year in Native languages and that the students not be enrolled in any other school.

Even though gaining fluency in a native language is the primary and essential objective of this proposed bill, we also need to ensure that students who attend these schools are also fully prepared for the future by becoming both fluent in English and academically proficient.

Just as we must honor the past by acting aggressively to preserve Native languages, we must provide Native American students with the English skills necessary to fully participate in the great American and global society. We do not believe there is a necessary trade-off between Native language instruction and the development of English language proficiency. In fact, properly done, dual-language schools can help students leave school proficient not only in academic subjects, but also conversant in two languages.

Evidence suggests the dual immersion approach results in improved native language fluency, English language competency, and cognitive ability. Children exposed to two languages at an early age are more flexible, creative, and achieve higher cognitive development at an early age than children who learn only one language. Active use of native languages in the classroom allows students to retain ties to their culture and their past, while literacy skills in a first or native language can increase second language

acquisition. In addition, studies have consistently shown that immersion students do at least as well, and in some instances even surpass, comparable non-immersion students on measures of verbal and mathematics skills. As a result, the Department believes it is necessary that the bill also support the goal of English language proficiency.

All students, including Native American students, should be held to high academic standards. Under the Improving America Schools Act of 1994, all BIA schools had to adopt new content standards. Bureau schools were given the choice to adopt the voluntary national standards, adopt State standards, or develop their own standards (so long as they were as rigorous as the State or national standards). Most BIA schools have chosen to adopt the standards of the state where the school is located. Students attending schools funded under this legislation must have the same opportunities as their state student counterparts to achieve academically.

I would like to raise an additional point regarding the way in which language proficiency is addressed in the proposed legislation. According to section 8 (c)(1)(D) of S. 2688, a Native Language Survival School receiving Federal funds shall “ensure that students who are not Native American language speakers achieve fluency in a Native American language within 3 years of enrollment.” The requirement is significantly more rigorous than the provision in existing ESEA Title I law that deals with English language learning for students who speak English as a second language. We must take into account the reality that individual students learn at different rates based on various factors, such as the level of fluency upon entering schools, literacy in their native language, and their motivation to learn languages.

School Finance and Governance. Under S. 2688, tribes and institutions of higher education (IHEs) can apply for funds, while the eligibility of State Educational Agencies (SEAs) and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) is unclear. This raises some questions concerning school finance and governance. Who pays for operational costs? Who makes decisions about teacher qualifications? What core academic subjects should be taught? The Department of Education would like to work with Members of this Committee to clarify the types of schools that would be eligible to receive funding under the proposed legislation. It is not clear whether native Language Survival Schools are to be public schools governed and operated by either a LEA or a tribe, or whether they could be public schools or independent private schools. The resolution of this issue will have important consequences for this program, and for the students who attend the schools. For example, public schools operated by LEAs or tribes receive other Federal education funds, while private schools only indirectly benefit from Federal programs. Public schools, operated by LEAs, must meet a range of State requirements ranging from the establishment of academic standards for all students to the qualifications of the teachers in the schools.

Research and Evaluation. S. 2688 would be strengthened by the addition of a research and evaluation component. There is still much we need to learn about how best to teach Native American languages in school. Therefore, it is important to evaluate the programs supported under the proposed Act, to identify and document effective educational methods practiced at Native American Language Survival Schools, and disseminate these

as widely as possible, to other schools and to Tribal Colleges and other institutions of higher education preparing the next generation of Native American teachers. Further, funds should be made available to support research on issues that are important to meet the objectives of this proposal, such as research on Native Language retention. Funds should also be made available for the development of tapes, orthographies, dictionaries, and materials development in native languages.

Conclusion

The Administration is committed to ensuring that Native American students receive a high-quality education in not only English, but also their native language and culture. Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee. I am willing to answer any questions you many have concerning my testimony.