

Hearing before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs  
on S. 575, the Native American Languages Act  
May 15, 2003

Testimony of Namaka Rawlins

Aloha e Ka Lunahoomalu e Ke Kenekoa Campbell a me ke keiki o ka aino o Hawaii e Ke Kenekoa Inouye, aloha pu ia oe e Ke Kenekoa Akaka, ke kupa o ka aina a me na lala a pau o keia komike hanohano nona ke kuleana o ka malama i ka pono o na kini lahui oiwi mai ka la hiki i ke kai pae opua o ka Akelanika a hiki i na kai lana malie o ka Pakipika; aloha oukou a pau.

(Aloha Chairman Campbell, Senators Inouye and Akaka and members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs.)

Mahalo nui to the Committee on Indian Affairs for allowing me to provide testimony on behalf of the Aha Punana Leo regarding the Native American Languages Act.

I am Namaka Rawlins, the director of the private non-profit Native Hawaiian language education organization, Aha Punana Leo, Inc. Our state-wide native organization is the oldest in the United States providing education through the Language Nests and Language Survival School model. This year marks 20 years of our work in this area.

We thank Congress, this Committee, and especially you, Senator Inouye, for establishing the governmental structure to allow us at the grassroots level to carry forth the mission that our kupuna - those who have gone before us - have entrusted to us.

In the late 1980s we came to you. We were told in Hawaii that the reason that Hawaiian had been made illegal in the schools was because of a federally imposed policy to eliminate Native American languages like Hawaiian. You introduced for us the Native American Languages Act and suggested that we work with other Native Americans to get the Act passed. After three years of intensive lobbying by Native people from throughout the United States, the Native American Languages Act of 1990 passed. It was just a beginning because it established a new supportive policy by our country for its indigenous languages.

Two years later we came before you again and asked for funding for community efforts in Native American language preservation and revitalization. This Committee on Indian Affairs was again the source of support and the 1992 NALA amendments passed. Many American Indian and Alaska Natives have used planning grants from the 1992 NALA amendments to visit our Hawaiian language nests and language survival schools model. Now, many of these groups are now ready to establish more permanent programs of language nests and language survival schools. There is, however, no

source of funding specifically for language nests and language survival schools. The few programs that exist, including ours, have had great difficulty in achieving funding stability. The third amendment to NALA - S 575 before the Committee on Indian Affairs today, provides a means to fund Native American language nests and Native American language survival schools, give them support from well established programs and to develop stability of funding. And we need to assure that other federal legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, is modified to reflect U.S. policy on Native American languages as found in NAL.

These new amendments to NALA are not intended to take the place of the community programs of the 1992 NALA and other assistance to the teaching of Native American languages in standard public schools. This is a new initiative. Those earlier initiatives need to continue to be funded and support expanded as the United States is really only at the beginning of its effort to revitalize languages that were greatly impacted by earlier highly funded efforts of the federal government to eliminate Native American languages. The United States has taken the lead in terms of recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples, but perhaps because language learning has never been as major an interest in our country as it has been elsewhere, the United States has not given as much funding attention to indigenous language revitalization as other countries such as New Zealand and most recently Canada.

The revitalization of indigenous languages is truly an international issue. Just recently a study was printed in WorldWatch magazine predicting that 90% of the world's languages will die out within the next 100 years if nothing is done. The magazine article describes a devastating future for Native American languages. The founders of the Aha Punana Leo realized the problem in the 1970s when we ascertained that our highly fluent Hawaiian speaking elders had all been born before 1920 and that only a tiny handful of children knew our language at all – these children all being concentrated in a tiny a very vulnerable community. We saw that our language was headed for extinction. We knew from the elders' stories that what had killed the language was the schools. We also knew from them that earlier Hawaiians had had their own full system of Hawaiian language schools that had been the reason that so much of Hawaiian culture had been preserved in writing. Until schools where children could be educated through Hawaiian were again available as a choice, the language was under a constant threat. And until such schools were available, Hawaiian speaking children in the schools were subject to persecution and disassociation from their language and growth in it as had been the case for almost all Native Hawaiians then for nearly a century.

We could not sit by the sidelines and have our language go extinct with the passage of our elders. We could not envision families being denied the choice to put their children in Hawaiian language schools for another century. So we got serious about the business of learning our language ourselves, protecting children speakers from the persecution that the elders had experienced, and developing an overall program of revitalizing our language among our people.

Our revitalization program began with Punana Leo Hawaiian language nests. These were for preschool-aged children and brought Hawaiian speaking elders and others in the community together

with Hawaiian speaking children and children from homes that wanted Hawaiian to become the language of their children again. We then moved these children into Kula Kaiapuni Hawaii Hawaiian language survival schools, adding a grade a year until we graduated our first senior class in 1999. Today there are some 2,000 students enrolled in Hawaiian language nests and Hawaiian language survival schools. Some 100 have already graduated with over 80% accepted into college, several into prestigious institutions. The schools are conducted entirely in Hawaiian through grade four. In grade 5, a one hour English language arts course is introduced, which continues through grade 12. All the children reach the same level of fluency and literacy in English as their peers in the English public schools, even where children speak Hawaiian at home. Our children have even won statewide awards for English writing in competition with students who go to school only in English and speak no Hawaiian.

Language revitalization has been a very difficult path – it was illegal to use our Hawaiian language in education when we began – the legacy of a federal requirement when Hawaii was made a territory that our Hawaiian language schools be banned. We lobbied for three years to change the state ban and even then the state did not immediately carry out the law. Our organization has run the statewide language nest program on our own without state support. Until today, we are the only entity running education through Hawaiian for preschool aged children although a number of others have tried.

At the language survival school level, we opened a kindergarten language survival school class in 1986 at one of our language nests. We declared it a public school open to all as a service to the state while it worked out how it would implement the new law lifting the ban on Hawaiian language education. In 1987, the state asked us to move the program into a state-owed public school site and also asked us to gather together the students, a teacher and materials for the program. Advisors told the state that we should be treated as a bilingual program as provided immigrant groups and wanted to transition us to English by third grade. We insisted that Hawaiian was distinct from immigrant languages and insisted that Hawaiian speaking children be allowed to attend school in Hawaiian for the entire period of compulsory schooling and until graduation. The state did not provide any books claiming that Hawaiian was solely an oral language. We begin teaching Hawaiian reading and writing in our language nests to preschool aged children and disagreed very strongly with the state's position. So we developed the curriculum materials for the language survival schools ourselves. Whenever the state said that it was impossible for them to do something for Hawaiian language medium education, we did it ourselves. We provided the state with transportation, we provide them with sites, and we provided them with teachers. And then we helped them integrate these into their formal institution.

In 1989, we convinced our legislators to establish a Hawaiian language center at the University of Hawaii at Hilo where we had been holding summer curriculum development sessions. This was the beginning of a relationship with state education at a different level. The Aha Punana Leo developed a consortium with this center - the Hale Kuamoo - to provide a full Hawaiian curriculum for children in Hawaiian language survival schools. We developed Hawaiian computer systems, including access to the internet through Hawaiian so that the children on different islands in the state could

communicate in Hawaiian with each other and do their work using modern technology the same as the children in the English schools. The Aha Punana Leo also worked with the University of Hawaii at Hilo Hawaiian language program to provide inservice training to teachers in Hawaiian language survival schools.

As our work with the University of Hawaii at Hilo expanded, we lobbied our legislature to make the Hawaiian program at the University of Hawaii at Hilo into a Native College that would provide further training in Hawaiian and a full teacher licensing unit in Hawaiian for our Hawaiian language survival schools, college courses through Hawaiian, and graduate education in our language and culture. The legislature finally agreed to our proposal in 1997 and Ka Haka Ula O Keelikolani College. Working with the College we have written down teachings of our elders into a philosophy of education to be used in training teachers. This educational philosophy the Kumu Honua Mauli Ola was then used as a basis by the Native Hawaiian Education Council to develop a set of standards for Native Hawaiian Education for all schools English and Hawaiian that serve Native Hawaiian children and for community educational activities as well.

Our work in Hawaiian language nests and Hawaiian language survival schools has had an important impact on Native Hawaiians outside the schools as well. Local banks now allow checks in Hawaiian and there has been a strengthening of Hawaiian hula and music due to the strengthening of our language. Hawaiian has also spread in second language classes in the English medium high schools where most Native Hawaiians attend. These students have been able to use our books and videos and visit language nests and survival schools to strengthen their use of Hawaiians. Universities and colleges in Hawaii have also expanded their offerings of Hawaiian due to the growth of interest in the language and they also use our materials. Families have expanded the use of Hawaiian in their homes, and some young couples are raising their children as first language speakers of the language from birth again. Besides the 2,000 students enrolled in language nests and language survival schools we affect another 2,000 studying Hawaiian in the English high schools another 2,000 in the universities and colleges and an untold number in canoe clubs, hula schools, and other cultural efforts.

Since the very beginning of our effort we have placed a heavy emphasis on learning from others. We are lucky in Hawaii in that we are exposed to so many different peoples both in our general population and also among visitors to the islands. We also have had exposure to other places through military service and other travel. As part of the Polynesian peoples we also have connections to thirteen other political entities in the Pacific which in turn are connected to other countries in the Europe and the Americas. This has lead to us hosting major conferences, exchanges, visits, and establishment of the Polynesian Languages Forum at Ka Haka Ula O Keelikolani College.

The concept of language nests and language survival schools is not new. In traditional times, all indigenous peoples had their own ways of educating their babies and children using their own languages. With the expansion of European structures into the rest of the world, a number of

indigenous peoples - Cherokees, Hawaiians, Aleuts, and others adopted systems of schooling based on literacy and books similar to what was happening at the same period in Meiji Japan and other parts of Asia. But indigenous language based education systems within the school model were prevented from being adopted by others and eliminated where they already existed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries - the period which has brought us to this period of imminent extinction for indigenous languages.

However, towards the end of the twentieth century, suppression of indigenous languages began to weaken and schooling through indigenous languages began to be seen as a human right. The larger indigenous languages of Europe - Welsh in Great Britain and Catalan in Spain have been the formerly suppressed languages that have made most progress in revitalization and in the development of systems of support for language nests and language survival schools. Among non-European peoples, the most advanced are the Danish Greenlanders, the New Zealand Maori and the Hawaiians of the United States.

Because of the long history of suppression of indigenous peoples and their languages, establishing language nests and language survival schools involves addressing negative stereotypes of indigenous identity and lingering suppression both from outside the indigenous community and also from within the indigenous community due to internalized negative views of their own culture among indigenous people. We in the Aha Punana Leo have had to deal with this – when our educational system told us that Hawaiian was not to be written, was incapable of being used for teaching beyond lower elementary subjects, and was unimportant as an area for standards development and testing. The low level of funding of Hawaiian comparable to foreign languages with smaller enrollments is another area where a history of past suppression has affected the structure of the educational system.. And within the Native Hawaiian community itself, we have had to deal with those who felt that the children were being harmed from learning through Hawaiian, that we were preventing children from learning English, that Hawaiian had no value, that we were harming Hawaiian rather than supporting it, and that we were trying to make Native Hawaiians who did not speak Hawaiian look bad. We are overcoming these things. More and more Native Hawaiians are supporting the language and seeing the positive effects not only on children but on our people as a community – for the Hawaiian language is a treasure of our Native Hawaiian community regardless of whether we as individuals speak or not. Indeed, some of the strongest supports of our effort have been non-Hawaiian speaking family members of children in our schools. Some of these family members have tried very hard to learn the language themselves but have found that unlike the children who pick it up so easily it has been very difficult for them. Nevertheless they share with the children the cultural knowledge that they learned from their elders - and one of these is that we all have talents to share and we all work together.

Over the past twenty years of our organization we have developed a web of relationships with other Native American communities throughout the United States interested in language revitalization. We have helped groups with information to their tribal councils and school boards; We have provided

information on developing specialized fonts and computer programs; we have served as consultants for tribes and as members on national organizations; we have sponsored resolutions and written articles for national publications. We have even sent teachers to teach teachers in other schools. Our biggest impact has been through hosting visitors. Hosting visitors is part of traditional Hawaiian culture. In the past five months alone we have hosted members of the Cheyenne, Crow, Navajo, Alutiiq, Central Yup'ik Onondaga, Mohawk, Cayuga, and Squamish peoples. Several of these have remained in contact with us for further support on their language projects.

S 575 will allow us to continue our work in Hawaiian and assist other indigenous people as well. By working together, much can be accomplished. We can save for future generations of our own peoples and for all the peoples of the world, the great beauty of the languages and cultures that our elders have left for us, and with those languages develop high quality education that will assure our children will be fully a part of an interconnected world.