

TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS

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Hearing on S. 575, Proposed Amendments to the
Native American Languages Act of 1990/1992

Testimony presented by
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Before I begin my testimony, I want to thank the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs for the opportunity to comment on S. 575, an amendment to the Native Languages Act of 1990 and 1992 and for your support and commitment to the Indigenous nations, peoples, and languages of this country. The majority of us in this room know the dire vital statistics and sad history pertaining to the Indigenous languages of the United States of America. I come today, not to reiterate those statistics and history, but to discuss the various ways Indigenous communities and individuals are working to renew the life of their communities and languages and to insure that they remain strong for generations to come.

In my testimony I will speak from practical knowledge and experience as a member of Cochiti Pueblo, a small Keres-speaking community in New Mexico, who was involved in my community's initial planning, development and implementation of its mother language renewal initiatives and as a professor/researcher at the University of Arizona, currently examining the relationship between Native language shift and retention and the academic achievement of Native American children. From both these perspectives, I hope to reveal to you some valuable lessons we have learned in New Mexico and Arizona. These lessons will illuminate the reasons why we support the proposed S. 575 amendments to the Native Languages Acts, which include the development and funding for Native American language survival and demonstration schools, Native American language nests, and the development of a center system for Native American language survival schools at the university level.

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE LEARNING IN A COMMUNITY

As Dr. Christine Sims has discussed in her testimony, Cochiti Pueblo has served as a model for other communities in New Mexico and beyond. During the summer of 1996, after five years of preliminary research (i.e., educational and socio-linguistic surveys, identification of community resources and strengths, examination of various Indigenous language renewal programs) and planning, a six-week immersion program focusing on the revitalization of Keres among its children was initiated. Initially, this grassroots initiative was largely supported by tribal and private funding and later by financial support from the Administration for Native Americans and the Linguistic Institute of Native Americans (LINA), a New Mexico-based non-profit training organization that provides technical assistance and training resources to Native speech communities and schools. The success of Cochiti's language renewal efforts is due to the tribal members who devoted their time, energy, intellects, and hearts to this vital endeavor, as well as to the Cochiti Tribal Council, which provided unfailing support and guidance in our efforts. It was not uncommon for the language renewal planning committee comprised of Cochiti tribal members and Tribal Councilmen to meet into the late evening. And, the first cohort of Cochiti teachers voluntarily participated in weekly immersion training two months prior to beginning the immersion program. Vena A-dae Romero, a soon-to-be Princeton graduate, who is sitting here today with us, along with other young adults in the community, tirelessly worked as youth assistants in the immersion program.

Like other Indigenous communities, we started out with no blueprint to guide us in revitalizing our language. Although we had the Hawaiian *'Aha Punana Leo* preschools, the Maori language nests in New Zealand, and the California master-apprentice models to borrow bits and pieces from, we realized that creating an approach that embraced the intellectual traditions of our community and our oral form of government would require something different. Cochiti, like the other Pueblos of New Mexico, has a unique governance structure in which "church and state" are inseparable and the Indigenous language is crucial for its internal workings. Because our physical and spiritual being and our epistemologies are intricately shaped by our Native language, it was crucial that we renew our language in ways that respected our own values, beliefs, and oral traditions. Therefore, with technical assistance from LINA, Cochiti began to create its language renewal initiative based on a socio-cultural perspective and the intellectual traditions of the Cochiti people. It began training Native speakers to become language teachers through second language acquisition approaches and techniques. The "speaker-teachers" learned about the complex process of working with language learners; what has to happen for language learning to happen, and how many things can get in the way of successful language learning. Simultaneously, we began community-wide efforts to create awareness of the vitality of the language and factors that contribute to its loss. To make a long story short, since 1996, Cochiti has faithfully continued its language renewal efforts up to this day. The goal of our efforts is to bring life back to our mother language through the creation of new generations of Cochiti speakers. The two young Keres-speaking Cochitis here today, Travis Pecos and Carla Herrera, are testaments to our community's deep commitment to the perpetuation of its mother language, its way of life, and its children.

In retrospect, in the complex process of developing, planning, and implementing a language renewal initiative in our community, we learned invaluable lessons. We learned that—

- The language renewal process must begin from the inside of the community, in the hearts and minds of its people.
- A clear understanding of your language is crucial because this understanding is the foundation for all the decision making and planning in a speech community's efforts. You should carefully consider the historical, educational, political, socio-linguistic, cultural and spiritual contexts and realities of the speech community.
- The language renewal process must fit your community and should be culturally and linguistically consistent with the hopes, aspirations, and goals of the community. For example, the Pueblos have maintained oral traditions and thus have developed ways to strengthen the functional uses of language in the community, while the Navajos have had a long history of Native language literacy and bilingual education in schools.
- The language renewal process must recognized and incorporate the intellectual traditions of the Native people, their ways of knowing, learning and teaching, including the community's socialization practices and patterns (Romero, 2003).¹
- Your language renewal efforts must be supported by the formal leadership of the community.

The community-based language renewal initiatives in New Mexico are reaching some success, as described above in the Cochiti example. However, despite these advances, communities often do not have the financial or educational resources to effect any change. In particular, in this complex process of language renewal, communities need, for example, language teachers, materials, training in the teaching approaches and techniques, and technical assistance in language program development, implementation, and long-term sustainment. For community-based language renewal initiatives, which promote functional language use in the homes and communities, these resources become vital to their success. Therefore, while we support all of S. 575's purposes (Sec.2), we also propose the inclusion of additional centers for language renewal program planning and training for the Southwest Indigenous communities. The Linguistic Institute for Native Americans has notably been providing these training and advocacy services to primarily the New Mexican tribes and would be an ideal site/organization for this purpose. They are currently working closely with the New Mexico tribal nations and State Board of Education in the development of Native language teacher licensure policies and requirements. The American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI) is a summer institute held annually at the University of Arizona. It assists educators and community members in the teaching of Indigenous languages in schools and communities. AILDI has been a key teacher-training site for 25 years and offers undergraduate and graduate courses that lead toward regular teacher degree programs and endorsements. Along with LINA, AILDI will greatly contribute to the Southwest's Indigenous language renewal efforts as university-based centers supported and funded by this legislation.

LANGUAGE AND THE SCHOOLING OF AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS

I'd like to turn now to Arizona and the education of American Indian children in this country. The discussion above highlighted one community that, from the beginning, engaged the entire community in a methodological process for the renewal of its mother language. Underway in

other Indigenous communities are school-based language renewal efforts, such as the Navajo, Yup'ik, and Hawaiian immersion education programs. Research and experience in Indigenous communities in this country and around the world (Benjamin, Pecos & Romero, 1996; Holm & Holm, 1995; Johnson & Swain, 1997; Sims, C., 2001; Stiles, 1997; Watahomigie & McCarty, 1997)² have proven that immersion education provides opportunities for American Indian children to develop the necessary Native language and cognitive proficiencies while simultaneously developing their English and academic proficiencies. This is why these proposed amendments are crucial. They will support practices and learning pedagogy that have been proven effective in promoting the acquisition of both the Native and English languages.

Unfortunately, despite these advances in reversing language shift, external forces continue to exert pressure to abandon the teaching and learning of Native languages in this country. Current state and federal mandates such as Arizona's Proposition 203, which prohibits native-language instruction for most limited-English-proficient children in public schools, and America's No Child Left Behind Act, which requires that funds be used only for the acquisition of English, ignore the language acquisition research findings that show that a school curriculum which incorporates and promotes the language and culture of an Indigenous community positively effects the academic learning and achievement of Indigenous children. In our current research at the University of Arizona³, my colleagues, Drs. Teresa McCarty and Ofelia Zepeda, and I have witnessed the harmful impact that these state and federal initiatives are having on the Native language revitalization efforts in Arizona's schools and Indigenous communities. We are presently in our third year of a national study examining the impact of Native language shift and retention on American Indian students' acquisition of English and academic content. Our preliminary findings reveal that, under the pressure from current state and federal accountability mandates and high stakes testing, many Native language teachers and schools are abandoning the teaching of Native languages. For instance, one Native elementary school teacher who had once been recognized by her school and community as an "expert teacher" of the Native language reported that she no longer uses her Native language with her students because, "We don't have time to teach the Native language. We've been told to teach the standards" (McCarty, 2002, p. 198). This potent example reveals that as Indigenous communities are focusing on developing and implementing effective approaches and techniques for the renewal of their mother languages, hegemonic societal pressures are hindering their efforts. Clearly, legislative acts such as the Native Languages Act and S.575 are central to the restoration and perpetuation of this country's Indigenous languages.

¹ Romero, M. E. (2003). *Perpetuating the Cochiti way of life: A study of child socialization and language shift in a Pueblo community*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Department of Education, Language, Literacy and Culture, University of California, Berkeley.

² Benjamin, R., Pecos, R., & Romero, M.E. (1996) Language revitalization efforts in the Pueblo de Cochiti: Becoming literate in an oral society. In Nancy Hornberger (Ed.) *Indigenous literacies in the Americas: Language planning from the bottom up*. Berlin/New York: Mouton.

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³ “The Impact of Native Language Shift and Retention on American Indian Student’s English Language Learning and School Achievement” is a 3-year research study funded by the Institute of Education Sciences (formerly Office of Educational Research and Improvement) and sponsored by the Department of Language, Reading and Culture at the University of Arizona.