

TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS

MAY 15, 2003

HEARING ON S. 575

PRESENTED BY

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PART I. INTRODUCTION

On behalf of the Pueblo of Acoma, the oldest continuously inhabited village in the United States, and the Linguistic Institute for Native Americans, I appreciate the opportunity to present to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs our support of S.575 as well as our recommendations to the amendments proposed to the Native Languages Act of 1990 and 1992. The proposed amendments to this bill include development and funding for Native American language survival schools, Native American language nests, and the support and development of demonstration programs to provide assistance to survival schools and language nests.

The Native American Languages Act of 1990 and 1992, passed by the U.S. Congress, recognized in its provisions the unique status that tribes hold in the United States as sovereign entities through treaties and acts of Congress (Cohen, 1982). Today, as this Committee reviews this vital and important Act, our hope is that this body will once more reaffirm its commitment to Native people and the survival of their languages and cultures through careful and thoughtful consideration of each testimony that has been prepared and presented for your review.

PART II. THE NEED FOR NATIVE LANGUAGE SURVIVAL

For indigenous people across this nation, the significance of issues related to language survival are inextricably entwined with cultural survival. For Native American communities the continuance of cultural values, traditions, native belief and governance systems are dependent on the continued transmission and use of native spoken languages. Unfortunately, for many native people this process has been seriously impacted by various historical factors that have attempted to destroy Native languages and cultures. This has included federal education policies and key events spanning the history of this nation and its treatment of America's original inhabitants. For some tribes, language loss has occurred to the degree that few or no speakers now exist. In other tribes, efforts to maintain and revitalize native languages and stem the pace of language shift are being seriously pursued through community-based and school-based language efforts.

Native American language revitalization efforts in my home state of New Mexico are being implemented by some tribes utilizing community-based approaches to address the need for creating younger generations of Native language speakers. In these cases tribal members in their various capacities as fluent speaking elders, Native traditional leaders and parents have taken up the responsibility of Native language teaching and language renewal (Benjamin, Romero, & Pecos, 1997; Blum-Martinez, 2000; Blum-Martinez, & Pecos, 2001). Some of these efforts have been supported in part by language grants from the Administration for Native Americans.

Among native language communities of the southwest, the phenomenon of language shift is increasingly evident although it varies from community to community in a state like New Mexico that includes 21

different tribes and six major languages. The need for language survival is becoming an issue of increasing concern, even among language communities where the native tongue is still being spoken as a child language. Among the five major languages of the Pueblo Indian tribes, the Tiwa, Tewa, Towa, Keres, and Zuni, languages have always functioned as the medium of spiritual and cultural life among the nineteen Pueblo Indian tribes that speak these languages. The Athabaskan languages spoken by the Apache and Navajo people are equally vital to the continuation of their cultural heritage. Yet, all are faced with the reality that language survival is threatened by tremendous socioeconomic, educational, and sociocultural pressures in today's society. While initial steps to strengthen and revitalize native language use have been pursued by various New Mexico tribes, the threat of language loss remains constant and warrants continued vigilance.

The uniqueness of Pueblo languages in our state reflects a history of some of the oldest and longest sustained cultures in this nation. Moreover, these languages have existed and still function primarily within a sociocultural and socioreligious community context (Blum-Martinez, 2000; Sims, 2001; Suina, 1990). As such, the oral tradition serves as the critical vehicle by which a community such as mine, Acoma Pueblo, maintains its internal sociocultural organization, its oral histories, cultural knowledge, and spiritual life ways. As well, the theocratic nature of our traditional governance system is dependent on speakers who can use the language in all its domains to encourage, to advise, to admonish, to pray, to guide, and to educate. To lose our language means that everything that is held together as a society will begin to unravel if the native language is lost among younger generations.

The implications of language loss are especially significant given this context where oral language use is still the basis of intergenerational cultural transmission and the foundation of tribal governance. Moreover, the erosion of native languages threatens to undermine the very core of spiritual belief systems that have been the foundation and stability of Pueblo societies through countless generations. The survival of these languages into the 21st century as oral based languages is a testimony to the resilience and wisdom with which tribal elders and tribal leaders have steadfastly refused to give up these languages, despite overwhelming pressures in the last century to abandon them. Their legacy and the future of young generations who will one day take their place and mine as leaders in our tribes will depend upon the steps we take today. Legislative acts such as the Native Languages Act are a critical means by which tribes can be supported in their language maintenance and restoration efforts, while also allowing for intervention measures that are appropriate to the existing needs and realities of different Native language communities.

PART III. THE POTENTIAL FOR STEMMING NATIVE LANGUAGE LOSS

Recent efforts to stem the tide against language loss, as noted earlier, have already begun in communities such as the Pueblo of Cochiti, Acoma, Taos, Zuni, Santa Clara, and Santa Ana. In the small pueblo of Cochiti, for instance, a tribe consisting of approximately 1000 members, the youngest generations of tribal members are beginning to relearn their native language which up until a few years ago remained viable only in age groups thirty years and older. Based on a 1995 survey of language vitality in the community, Cochiti Pueblo embarked on a series of community-based efforts that are focused exclusively on producing speakers of the language. Oral instruction in the native Keres language is provided for preschool toddlers, as well as elementary and secondary level students. The establishment of a Keres "language nest" in this village, the first of its kind in New Mexico, provides day care services for toddlers who are spoken to throughout their daily stay by caretakers who are fluent in the language. As well, summer immersion camps and year round daily instruction is provided by tribal members, parents, and traditional leaders.

Cochiti Pueblo's long term efforts have already begun to yield significant outcomes in young children who are speaking the Keres language once more. Two of these children are here today at these Senate hearings, as representatives of their Pueblo of Cochiti. Carla Herrera and Travis Pecos represent the hope of their community as young Cochiti people who will one day be leaders in their village, fluent in the native tongue, and capable of passing the language on to yet another future generation. They represent the future of young Native Americans who while maintaining a healthy connection to their communities and families are just as capable as any youngster in America in maintaining parity in academics. These two students have recently been accepted for participation in this year's Congressional Youth Leadership Program that will bring them back to Washington during summer 2003.

PART IV. THE NEED FOR A TRAINING AND DEMONSTRATION PROGRAM IN THE SOUTHWEST

The example of Cochiti Pueblo's efforts has not been lost on other Native tribes in New Mexico as well as tribes from other surrounding states. Various tribes have visited Cochiti Pueblo to observe their immersion teaching and in one case native language teachers from the pueblo mentored interns from another Keres speaking community who were interested in teaching language immersion classes in their community. Such experiences have created in New Mexico a network of shared training resources and expertise that have reached beyond the state. Acoma Pueblo and Taos Pueblo who also have immersion programs in place have also been visited by native speakers from the Apache tribes, the Ute Mountain Ute tribe in Colorado; as well as the San Juan Paiutes, the Tohono O'odham, the Hopis, and the Colorado River Tribes of Arizona.

This informal network of language communities in the southwest interested and eager to begin their own language initiatives points to a larger need for training and preparing a cadre of internal tribal expertise. As well, the unique set of considerations for language communities such as the Pueblo people who must honor the oral nature and traditions of their histories suggest that a demonstration program situated in the Southwest may in fact be better able to serve their needs. Many tribes in the greater southwest find that close proximity to other language programs in their immediate area makes it possible to utilize tribal and limited program resources more efficiently. As well, the informal support that tribes are able to provide each other as they develop new initiatives provides an immediate resource of first hand information sharing that is invaluable to native speakers. To a large extent training organizations such as the Linguistic Institute for Native Americans (LINA) has been able to help in these areas by conducting periodic Native language forums and training workshops. A recent 2002 forum conducted by LINA was attended by 21 different tribes from New Mexico and out of state.

With limited resources, LINA, a non-profit New Mexico based organization, currently provides technical assistance and training to tribes in a number of areas including: language planning, development of language immersion programs, training of Native speakers to teach language, as well as providing advocacy on Native language issues at the local and state level. The organization since its inception in the late 1970s has been governed by a Board of Directors who are all Native Americans from New Mexico.

The Linguistic Institute has a long history of working with Native American tribes in New Mexico since the late 1970s, often collaborating with university departments such as the linguistics and education departments of the University of New Mexico to provide special training institutes for native language speakers. These summer institutes were at one time offered in New Mexico as intensive six week programs of linguistic studies open to all Native language speakers from across the nation. In the 20+ years of program institutes over 40 different Native languages have been represented from across the United States as well as Canada. Since 1995, LINA has shifted its training focus primarily towards community based language initiatives. As such current on-site services provide training and technical assistance to tribes in language revitalization issues. The staff and training expertise of LINA is primarily drawn from University of New Mexico faculty with expertise in Native language planning, language teacher training, language revitalization issues as well as experience in working with Native language communities.

While interventions such as the establishment of language schools are noteworthy in their concept as a measure for providing total academic schooling in the native language, the means by which such measures are implemented requires tremendous financial and administrative resources and the infrastructure that many Pueblo communities do not presently have. More importantly, the parameters within which many Pueblo communities function as tribes whose social structures are deeply rooted in traditional and oral forms of governance, suggest a consideration of a training and demonstration program that should be added into the proposed amendments to the Native Languages Act.

The continuing need for development and training given our unique circumstances in the southwest make for a consideration that we hope this committee will entertain. Our recommendation is that a fourth center of training be established that will serve Native people of the southwest with a particular focus on working with tribal communities in the following areas:

- Development of training programs for fluent speakers that will prepare them for language teaching in the community.
- Development of administrative leadership that assists tribes and communities to undertake and sustain language efforts.
- Development of language teaching internships and mentorships that will help build the internal capacity of tribes to strengthen and sustain long-term community-based language efforts.
- Development of instructional language materials that will serve the needs of oral based language traditions.
- Language policy research that examines the long term effect of federal and state economic, social, and education policies on the survival of indigenous forms of governance and the role that language plays in sustaining such systems.
- Facilitating an understanding between tribes and governmental agencies about language survival issues that allows for appropriate collaborative measures of intervention and support.

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The Linguistic Institute for Native Americans

The Linguistic Institute for Native Americans is a New Mexico-based non-profit training organization that provides technical assistance and training resources to Native bilingual school programs and Native language communities engaged in language revitalization efforts. LINA was originally organized as a training institute to address the need for preparing American Indian teachers working in Native American bilingual education programs. Over the course of twenty years, summer institutes were organized in New Mexico (known as the Summer Institute of Linguistics for Native Americans) and held at the University of New Mexico. Regional Native language conferences and workshops conducted for Native speakers have also been sponsored in New Mexico by LINA. Native speakers representing over 40 different languages from across the United States and Canada have been served through many of the summer institutes held between 1974 and 1991.

Formally organized in 1981 as a non-profit organization in New Mexico, LINA provides assistance in the following areas: development of language use surveys, language planning for tribes, language teacher training, and development of language teaching curricula. On-site workshops, training, and technical assistance, and community forums on language issues are examples of some of the types of services that LINA provides. Services have been provided through short term grants provided by the Chamiza, Lannan, and McCune Foundations, as well as the New Mexico Office of Indian Affairs. LINA works closely with tribal communities and tribal leaders to ensure that services are tailored to the specific needs of their respective languages and to provide advocacy at the state level for Native American language issues.

The Linguistic Institute for Native Americans is governed by a Native Board of Directors who represent a broad spectrum of expertise in the fields of Native bilingual education, educational administration, and language revitalization research. Christine Sims is one of the founding members of the organization and serves as Chairman of the Board of Directors.

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