

**Testimony of Ryan Wilson (Oglala Lakota), President  
National Alliance to Save Native Languages  
Before the  
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies**

**March 25, 2015**

**Request:** We request \$3 million for Bureau of Indian Education Immersion Programs and Demonstration Projects.

**Introduction.** Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member McCollum, Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Ryan Wilson, President of the National Alliance to Save Native Languages. I am honored to testify today to provide the views of the Alliance on the importance and benefits of Native language immersion programs in the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) system.

**Continued Challenges in Indian Education.** Improving the educational achievement and academic progress of American Indians is a top priority of Indian country, this Subcommittee, and the Obama Administration. The United States has a unique political and legal relationship with American Indian tribal governments and a special historic responsibility for the education of American Indians and Alaska Natives. Recent reports by the Department of Education reiterate the academic failure of American Indian and Alaska Native students. *See* National Assessment of Educational Progress (2011); National Indian Education Study (2011); The Education Trust, "State of Education for Native Students," (2013). In addition, the September 2013 Government Accountability Office Report on the BIE discusses the poor condition of Indian Education.

**Trust Overview.** The federal government's failure to fulfill its trust responsibility regarding Indian education is demonstrated in the aforementioned studies and reports. This Subcommittee has a broad reaching trust authority because it provides both resources and oversight through the appropriations process. Fiduciary duties owed to the trust beneficiary must be administered within the context of the unique character and nature of the trust responsibility of the United States to Indian tribes. The responsibility for Indian education and treaty -based educational rights can best be summarized as the need to protect equality of educational opportunity and ensure that actions support tribal control of the use and development of educational entities and resources that are vital to academic achievement and to the survival of tribal languages and traditions.

To further the federal government's trust responsibility, a comprehensive Native Language Development and Culturally Based Education policy is needed to: (1) help tribal governments meet the linguistically unique educational needs of their children, including the need to preserve, revitalize, and use Native languages; (2) promote American Indian and Alaska Native tribal language immersion schools and develop the capacity of tribal communities to create successful immersion schools; (3) protect tribal language immersion schools from the promulgation of adverse rules and regulations and inappropriate assessment standards and tools that are incongruent with existing Native language law; and (4) promote intergovernmental (tribal/federal) collaboration and partnership.

**Generation Indigenous.** The 2016 Interior budget proposal is \$13.2 billion over the 2015 enacted level, an increase of 8 percent. This includes a \$1 billion investment in Indian education for a comprehensive transformation of the Bureau of Indian Education. The Generation-I initiative proposes a comprehensive approach to improving the lives and opportunities of Native youth. We strongly support Generation-I and the Administration's commitment to increasing funding for Native education. Additionally, the proposed budget is a necessary step to transform the BIE into an organization designed to support Tribes in educating their own youth and delivering a world-class and culturally appropriate education throughout Indian Country.

We support heightened Congressional and Administration engagement to comprehensively address the needs of Native learners. A truly comprehensive approach to Native education, however, necessarily includes culturally based educational efforts and, more specifically, Native language immersion. Significant research identifies Native language development as a crucial asset in the lives of Native youth academically, socially, and spiritually. Resiliency factors in Native youth are strongly linked to cultural indicators that embolden self-worth, self-reliance and kinship with one's tribal community.

Unfortunately, despite Generation-I's vast proposed budgetary increases, the initiative does not include a specific budget for immersion efforts and genuine, culturally based education. The \$1 billion education investment proposed by Secretary Jewell does not contain a single identified dollar to support existing immersion schools or BIE schools wishing to launch immersion programs. Without specified funds for language immersion, Generation-I and the Administration's Native education priorities cannot be considered truly comprehensive and will not address a critical element in turning the tide for Native youth.

While the proposed 8 percent increase in the full Interior budget contains hundreds of millions in new spending for preserving and protecting America's natural and cultural resources, it does not expressly address its Native languages. The budget request appropriately addresses rivers, lakes, civil rights sites, and other national treasures, but it omits Native languages from America's family of national treasures. Ironically many of the historical sites and natural sites under protection of the Interior Department bear names from tribal languages, yet the languages themselves are not afforded the protection they deserve.

**Proposed Native Language Demonstration Project.** Approximately 42,000 American Indian students attend the Bureau of Indian Education's 182-school system. Tribes, Indian organizations, BIE schools, Native learners, and language stakeholders are proposing an initiative to support Tribal Language Immersion Schools within the BIE system by creating "Demonstration Tribal Language Schools" within existing BIE schools. Demonstration Project selection criteria would center on capacity to offer a tribe's language as the medium of academic instruction for a minimum of 900 hours per academic year.

We request that the Subcommittee **provide BIE with \$3 million specifically allocated for Demonstration Tribal Language Magnet Schools** in FY 2016 by repurposing existing BIE and BIA resources. There are four existing Immersion programs within the BIE system: Rough Rock School (Chinle, AZ), Rock Point School (Rock Point, AZ), Lac Courte Oreilles Waadookodaading Ojibwa Immersion (Hayward, WI), and Nigaani (Leech Lake, MN). Competitive grants housed under the Director of the BIE would support and strengthen existing programs and enable others to participate, such as Wounded Knee (Manderson, SD) and Little

Wound (Kyle, SD), which wish to engage in full scale immersion programming but have been prohibited by lack of resources.

**Demonstration Project Authority.** Executive Order 13592, “White House Initiative on Improving Indian Education,” promises Native learners the opportunity to learn their Native Languages.” Additionally, Public Laws 93- 638, 100-297, offer the promise self-determination and tribal control of BIE schools. The Native American Languages Act of 1990 (Pub. Law 101-477) and the Esther Martinez Native American Preservation Act (Pub. Law 109-394) promote a policy of investing in Native languages and supporting Tribal Language Immersion Schools. Finally, the Snyder Act (Pub. Law 67-85) broadly authorizes Congress to appropriate resources for such activities in the Department of Interior and grants considerable flexibility to the Administration to support and initiate new activities in the area of Indian Affairs.

**Indian Country Support for Native Language Immersion Programs.** Broad-based support exists for tribal language immersion schools. The Administration heard this during Indian education consultation hearings, meetings, advisory groups, town halls, listening sessions, as well as receiving volumes of testimony supporting immersion schools and culturally based education. Further, the National Advisory Council on Indian Education has included in its annual reports recommendations supporting immersion schools for Indian Country and the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) and National Indian Education Association (NIEA) joint recommendations for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization call for a formula grant program for Native language immersion schools.

NIEA recently passed Resolution 2014-06, which supports a \$3million appropriation in FY16 for BIE immersion schools. NCAI passed the same resolution. The Tribal Interior Budget Council has also formally passed a motion approving this budget request. As a result of demonstrated Indian country support, this Subcommittee included a highly favorable endorsement of immersion schools in its FY15 Report Language. We hope that FY16 will include the funding necessary to make immersion schools a reality.

**The Need for Immersion-Specific Funds.** Unfortunately, Executive Order 13592 has not achieved its promise because it does not offer a pathway to creating venues for learning Native languages. Furthermore, budget cuts and assessment models that do not account for culturally based education or instruction have meant that the unique linguistic needs of Native learners have not been met, stalling development of tribal language immersion schools and immersion programs. The pending restructuring of the BIE, and difficulty forecasting budget challenges have also created a climate of retreat.

Native language instruction under the current Administration has decreased, not increased. Meanwhile, most tribal communities are one generation away from losing the cultural and linguistic capacity to offer immersion instruction.

Austerity has severely impacted Native language development because language programs rank at the bottom of academic priorities within the BIE. BIE schools that wish to launch meaningful language programs cannot do so because they already receive less than half the federal support needed for basic school operations. Additionally, there exists no “identified” support for continued development of tribal language immersion schools within the leadership of the BIE/BIA and Department of Interior. Making matters worse, Congress has placed a moratorium

on the expansion of BIE schools freezing the number at the current level (182). This does not provide expanding tribal communities with the opportunity to develop new federally supported schools through the BIE system. BIE facilities, staff, administration, school boards and so forth are fundamentally set and not flexible in accommodating new programs (Immersion tracks) without new resources.

The Administration for Native Americans, housed in the Department of Health and Human Services, does offer planning grants to launch immersion efforts through its Esther Martinez programs. Although these investments are vital to initiate immersion activities they are not sustainable because they have a three year maximum award. These hotly contested dollars are among the most competitive and are not designed to ensure programs' long-term solvency. Sustainable federal support for tribal language immersion schools simply does not exist.

BIE schools that wish to engage in the development of tribal language immersion schools need federal support that is additional to and separate from that which currently exists to support BIE school operations.

**Conclusion.** Indian Country believes that we have a sacred birthright, treaty right, policy mandate, and existing statutory vehicles for continued use and development of our tribal languages, cultures, and ceremonial practices—all of which are essential for our general well-being and identity as American Indian, and Alaska Native peoples. Our interest in achieving high levels of academic performance requires support for the proposed Demonstration Project, which is required by the demands of a multi-cultural and multi-lingual world. Native learners and their communities/parents who are seeking the benefits of tribal language immersion and culturally based education must have the opportunity to attend and participate in educational venues that promote fluency in their heritage language.

The mission of the Bureau of Indian Education is purposeful and supports this request: As listed in Title 25 CFR Part 32.3, **“BIE's mission is to provide quality education opportunities from early childhood through life in accordance with a tribes needs for cultural and economic well-being, in keeping with the wide diversity of Indian tribes and Alaska Native villages as distinct cultural and governmental entities. Further the BIE is to manifest consideration of the whole person by taking into account the spiritual, mental, physical and cultural aspects of the individual within his or her family and tribal or village context.”** The proposed demonstration project helps the BIE execute this mission and addresses every aspect of this mission.

We affirm with the highest conviction that there are significant cognitive, psychological, and academic benefits for our children and communities when they can participate in tribal language immersion schools. Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony and for considering this much-needed Demonstration Project.