

**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**

April 7, 2014

Request: We request \$3 million for Bureau of Indian Education demonstration projects.

Introduction. Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member Moran, Members of the Committee. My name is Ryan Wilson, President of the National Alliance to Save Native Languages. I am honored to be here to testify today before the Subcommittee 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.

Current Crisis in Indian Education. Improving the educational achievement and academic progress of American Indians is a high 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 carried out by the U.S. Department of Education continue to 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 order to further the Federal Government's commitment to improving the educational outcomes of American Indian and Alaska Native students and improving the quality and performance of schools and education programs for American Indians and Alaska Natives, 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 build successful immersion schools; (3) protect tribal language immersion schools from the promulgation of adverse rules, assessments, and regulations from federal agencies that are incongruent with existing statutes concerning Native language use; and (4) promote intergovernmental (tribal/federal) collaboration and partnership.

Proposed Native Language Demonstration Project. Approximately 42,000 American Indian students attend the Department of Interior's Bureau of Indian Education school system, which consist of 182 schools. American Indian tribes, Indian organizations, BIE schools, Native learners, and language stakeholders are proposing an Initiative to support Tribal Language Immersion Schools within the BIE system. This proposed initiative would create "Demonstration Tribal Language Magnet Schools" within existing BIE schools. Demonstration Project selection criteria would center on capacity to offer academic instruction with a tribe's language as the medium of 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 FY2015 by repurposing existing resources

allocated to the BIE and BIA. The Demonstration Projects would be selected through a competitive grant competition and housed under the Director of the BIE within the Department of Interior. There are currently three existing Immersion programs within the BIE system: Rough Rock School (Chinle, AZ), Rock Point School (Rock Point, AZ), and Nigaani (Leech Lake, MN). Our proposed appropriation would support and strengthen these existing programs. These funds would also enable the participation of schools 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 Public Law 101-477 and the Esther Martinez Native American Preservation Act Public Law 109-394 promote a policy of investing in Native languages and supporting Tribal Language Immersion Schools. Finally, the Snyder Act Public 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.

Widespread Calls for Native Language Immersion Programs. Education Secretary Duncan and former Interior Secretary Salazar met with Indian education experts during the first year of the Administration to gain advisement on Indian education issues. All in attendance articulated the urgent need for the Administration to engage in a meaningful way on Native language immersion schools and incorporating Native languages into culturally based education. The Administration met with tribal leaders and formed a National Tribal Leaders Education Task Force. This Task Force echoed the same concern regarding immersion schools, Native languages, and culturally based education. The Administration also engaged Indian Country in Indian education consultation hearings and received 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. 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. Broad based support exist for tribal language immersion schools, Indian country could not have expressed support for these schools any clearer to the Administration.

It is the position of NCAI and the coalition of Native organizations that are a part of the NCAI Native Language Working Group/Task Force, including the National Alliance to Save Native Languages, that language plays a significant role in influencing academic performance and general well-being of Native peoples. This position was first reflected in the Meriam Report of 1928 and reinforced in each of the following: the U.S. Senate Report, Indian Education: A National Tragedy, A National Challenge (1969); the Indian Education Act of 1972 (Title VII, NCLB); the Indian Nations At Risk Report (1991); the White House Conference on Indian Education (1992); federal policy through the Native American Languages Act (1990);federal policy through the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act (2006); and three Presidential Executive Orders (Clinton, 1998, Bush, 2004, Obama 2011).

Shortcomings of the Current Approach. Unfortunately, Executive Order 13592 is has not been effective in achieving its proposed policy goal because it does not offer a program or pathway to execute a strategy for supporting or creating venues where Native learners have an opportunity to learn their 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. Unstable leadership within the BIE, the pending restructuring of the BIE, and difficulty forecasting budget challenges have created a climate of retreat. Native language instruction under the Obama Administration has decreased, not increased.

Austerity has severely impacted Native language development because language programs rank at the bottom of academic priorities. 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 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.

Need for Increased Federal Support. BIE schools that wish to engage in the development of tribal language immersion schools need federal support. This federal support must be additional to and separate from that which currently exists to support BIE school operations. If Congress is to carry out its commitments to self-determination, sovereignty, and protection and revitalization of Native languages, it must provide resources for tribal language immersion schools. This funding is also essential to enabling BIE to complete its mission as well as to fulfilling the promises of President Obama's Executive Order on Indian Education. We believe the promotion of Demonstration Projects within the BIE school system that support the development of tribal language immersion schools within existing schools is a crucial step in achieving these policy mandates. The proposed Demonstration Project will be congruent with the policies of existing federal statutes concerning Native languages and tribal control that have been virtually ignored since passage of the No Child Left Behind (ESEA).

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 who can participate in tribal language immersion schools. Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony and for considering this much-needed Demonstration Project.