

**STATEMENT OF CLARENA M. BROCKIE  
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DEAN OF STUDENTS, AANIIH NAKODA COLLEGE – HARLEM, MONTANA  
UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS  
HEARING ON S. 2299 AND S. 1948**

Wednesday June 18, 2014

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, my name is Clarena M. Brockie, and I am Aaniiih (Gros Ventre) from Montana. Both of my parents are enrolled as Gros Ventre. I am proud to represent Montana's 32<sup>nd</sup> District, which includes the Fort Belknap and Rocky Boy Indian Reservations, in our state's House of Representatives. I am also the Dean of Students of the Aaniiih Nakoda College in Harlem, Montana. Aaniiih Nakoda College was chartered by the Fort Belknap Indian Community Council in 1984. We are a small school with a big mission, serving approximately 225 students per semester, most of whom are members of one of the two tribes on our reservation.

Thank for inviting me to testify at this hearing examining legislation to strengthen efforts to preserve and revitalize our Native languages. It is an honor to be given an opportunity to speak on behalf of the many people who cannot stand here today, but I know they are with me in spirit.

Aaniiih Nakoda College, along with the nation's other 36 Tribal Colleges and Universities, which collectively are the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, AIHEC, support S.1948 and S. 2299, both of which would help us as we work to ensure the survival and continuing vitality of Native American Languages.

**Current Status of Native Languages**

The Committee knows the dire situation we face as Indian people in terms of the loss of our languages, homelands, and identity, so I will not recite all of the statistics. I will just mention that when Christopher Columbus and other Europeans first came to Indian Country, more than 300 different languages were spoken here. Today, well less than half remain. Most of these are spoken only by a handful of elders and are in serious danger of disappearing -- in fact, all but 15 or 20 of our Native languages are spoken only by adults who are not teaching their younger generations the language. This tragic outcome is a direct result of prior U.S. government policies, including assimilation which sent many Indian children to government-run boarding schools where they were prohibited from – and often fiercely punished for – speaking their own languages, their last tie to their homelands and their very identity. This terrible legacy is made even worse when you consider that once a language becomes extinct, it takes with it much of the history, philosophy, ceremonies, culture, and environmental and scientific knowledge of the people who spoke it. It is difficult to imagine the degree to which such a loss will impact our Indian children and young people, who are already suffering from generational poverty and oppression, violence, abuse and neglect, lack of self-esteem, and most tragic, lack of hope.

Fortunately, over the past few decades, greater attention has been focused on the need to preserve our Native culture and language, and a few modest pieces of legislation have been enacted at the federal level, including the Native American Languages Act of 1990 and inadequately funded Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006.

### The Survival of Native Languages

My graduate school thesis focused on the Oral History of the Gros Ventre, and in the process of conducting research, I learned how meticulously and systematically our own Gros Ventre language had been removed from our homes and schools. We were even prohibited from conducting our ceremonies. The *Aaniiih nin* became one of the many tribes that was in danger of joining the group of "Vanishing Indians." In the early 1600s, there were more than 15,000 *Aaniiih nin* (White Clay People), but by 1903, there were less than 300. Anthropologist Al Kroeber visited the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation to collect as much of the culture and history of the *Aaniiih* as he could. He was soon followed by Clark Wissler, another noted anthropologist known for his work with supposedly dying tribes.

In 1997, the *Aaniiih* language, which is one of two Native languages spoken on the Fort Belknap reservation, was in the last stages of survival. Only 25 speakers existed, and no children -- kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade -- spoke the language. But despite the grim predictions and statistics, the *Aaniiih nin* have survived. Today, our language is beginning to thrive with more young language speakers, thanks to an important project at *Aaniiih* Nakoda College.

In the late 1990s, I was employed by *Aaniiih* Nakoda College (then called Fort Belknap College) as the Development Officer, and we decided it was time to write a planning grant proposal for a project to try to revive our language. At ANC, students are required to take language and tribal history classes for one or both tribes. In addition, *Aaniiih* and Nakoda language and culture classes are taught in the local public high schools and evening classes are held for community members who want to learn the *Aaniiih* and Nakoda languages. A speaker-learner project was also pursued. However, none of these efforts achieved the level of fluency we needed to ensure the continued vitality of our language into the future. It seemed that to be truly successful, the Native language needed to be spoken consistently in the home and at school. Without some kind of consistent reinforcement, many students retain only a portion of the words taught. I wrote the grant proposal, entitled "Speaking White Clay," with all of this in mind; and we prepared it with input and support of the Gros Ventre Cultural committee and Native language speakers.

Fortunately for us, the funder stressed the need to focus on our youth and asked in the review process, "What are you doing for the youth?" The goal of our grant was to ensure the survival and continuing vitality of our language and culture. With a funded plan, *Aaniiih* Nakoda College President Dr. Carole Falcon Chandler, along with staff and faculty, set out to fulfill the dream of our elders to protect our language.

After researching the issue, we determined that our best hope for success was in the establishment of a full day immersion program. In 2003, Dr. Janine Pease, who conducted an extensive study of Native American language immersion initiatives entitled "Native American Language Immersion: Innovative Native Education for Children and Families," writes:

- *“Most intriguing about the Native and Indigenous language immersion models is the clear and positive connection between Native and Indigenous language and culture with educational achievement.”*
- *“For indigenous people, Native American language immersion activities hold great promise in the development of children, youth, family and community.”<sup>1</sup>*

### **Establishment of the White Clay Immersion School**

In 2003, the White Clay Immersion School was established under the Aaniiih Nakoda College. The goals of the school are to: (1) promote the survival and vitality of the White Clay language; (2) provide culturally based educational opportunities that build cognitive skills and foster academic success; (3) instill self-esteem and positive cultural identity; and (4) prepare students to become productive members of society.

Unfortunately, since we wrote our proposal in 1997, we have lost our oldest Native speakers. Today, no fluent elder Aaniiih speaker lives on the Fort Belknap Reservation. There are a few younger people who have learned the language and speak it well. However, today the largest generation of Aaniiih speakers comprises the students of Aaniiih Nakoda College’s White Clay Immersion School (WCIS). Since WCIS began, child Native speakers has grown from none to 30. Students at WCIS attend a full day of classes in an immersion setting. Teaching and learning focus on the White Clay language and rely heavily on Native knowledge and Native ways of knowing and being. Non-Native ways of learning are incorporated to offer students the best of both worlds and to help them become positive and successful members of the larger community. WCIS’s curriculum emphasizes the interconnections between physical, mental and spiritual well-being through cross-disciplinary integration, intergenerational learning, and field-based learning experiences. Students participate in community projects, public events, and international exchanges.

The White Clay Immersion School is the first, and now one of two, full day Native language immersion schools operating within a Tribal College. Oglala Lakota College in Kyle, South Dakota operates the other TCU-based immersion school, through grade 5. WCIS now includes both elementary and middle school. The school is housed in the beautiful Aaniiih Nakoda Cultural Building. This unique and innovative partnership in educational self-determination serves as a transformative model for other American Indian communities across the United States that is facing the impending loss of their own Native language.

### **Administrative Leadership and Quality of WCIS Staff**

The White Clay Immersion School operates within Aaniiih Nakoda College’s central administration, under the direction of the college president. Dr. Lynette Chandler serves as the director of White Clay Immersion School since its inception in 2002. She has extensive knowledge of and training in immersion teaching practices and has working with indigenous language experts from Montana, Wyoming, Hawaii, Peru, and Guatemala, Australia and New Zealand. Dr. Chandler earned her B.S. (English) and M.A. (Native

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<sup>1</sup>Pease-Pretty On Top, Janine. “Native American Language Immersion: Innovative Native Education for Children and Families.” Publication of the American Indian College Fund with support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation of Battle Creek MI. 2003. Page 12.

American Studies) at Montana State University and her Ed.D. (Educational Leadership) at the University of Montana. Her accolades include being named "Montana Indian Educator," in 2012; awarded the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Career Enhancement Fellowship by the American Indian College Fund; and, in 2008 the White Clay Immersion School received the Commissioner's Outstanding Project Award from the Administration for Native Americans. Two of the classroom instructors have graduated from the Office of Indian Education Teacher Training Program. Both of the Aaniih language teachers have their doctorate degrees, are fluent in Aaniih.

- **Success and Academic Achievement for WCIS students**

Graduates from the White Clay Immersion School have transitioned to public schools and are recognized by these schools as leaders in student government, academics, and sports. For example, students graduating from WCIS in 2013 are now sophomores at a local off-reservation public school. Last year, two students from the White Clay Immersion Class received the Science Award, Math Award, English Award, Literature Award and Art Award for their grade at their new off-reservation high school. They also excelled in athletics, receiving the varsity basketball awards and were on the honor roll throughout the school year.

Of the original 2011 graduating class for WCIS who have gone on to local public schools, three of the four students have been inducted into the National Honor Society. All four are on the honor roll; they excel in sports and are involved in community activities; they work after school and will be employed this summer. All of these students will be seniors in fall 2014. For the last three years, these students have been at the forefront of leadership within their school. They are on the student council; participate in Jobs for Montana Graduates, Indian Club, Yearbook, volunteer programs and lead the class awards at the end of school year. Two of three students who have graduated from WCIS in 2012 have been inducted into the National Honor Society and all are on the honor roll. They have received numerous awards in high school and are working summer jobs current for the City of Harlem. These students excel in their specific clubs, are managers on sports teams excel in track, basketball and volley ball. They volunteer in the community or school on a regular basis.

- **Financial Security for WCIS**

Financial support for the White Clay Immersion Schools has been sporadic. The bulk of funding has come from private foundations and local support. In addition, we have received funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration of Native American (ANA) program. However, this is a competitive program and in some years, WCIS has not been funded.

WCIS does not receive funding from the state or any federal formula funding. Instead, the staff host fund raisers to support schools trips, lunches, supplies and other school activities. Although it is a struggle at times, Aaniih Nakoda College remains committed to our goal for the survival of our Aaniih language, and we remain committed to all current and future students of the White Clay Immersion School, who hold the future of our people in their hands and hearts. Grounded in their culture and confident in their language, we know that through them, our people and our language will thrive for many generations to come.

## Other Successful Native Language Models: TCUs Lead the Way

American Indian education scholar Jon Reyhner brings perspectives from American Indian leaders and educators on the critical role and value of tribal languages in the lives of tribal people and the health and well-being of their communities:

- Cecelia Fire Thunder, former Oglala Sioux Tribal President, stated *"I speak English well because I spoke Lakota well...our languages are value based. Everything I need to know is in our language. It is bringing back our values, and good things about how to treat each other."* (2005 at NIEA).
- Richard Littlebear, President of Chief Dull Knife College said, *"Our youth are apparently looking to urban gangs for those things that will give them a sense of identity, importance and belongingness. ...But we (the Cheyenne) have all the characteristics in our tribal structures that will reaffirm the identities of our youth."*
- Vine Deloria and Daniel Wildcat, in *Power and Place: Indian Education in America, 2001*, outline a framework for Indigenous language revitalization programs. Deloria writes, *"power and place produce personality. ...the Native American sacred view contrasts with the material and pragmatic focus of the larger American society."*
- Lanny Real Bird, Crow and Arikara Professor at Little Big Horn College notes, *"Many of the participants, facilitators, or teachers of the native languages are elders, who bring a wealth of knowledge not just limited to the languages. Their experience provides interaction with cultural practices or experiences, values, protocol, and holistic awareness that includes spiritual and traditional teachings."*<sup>2</sup>

Yet, despite the documented need and proven value, funding for language immersion and revitalization programs has been particularly problematic for American Indian people, particularly because funding sources are categorical (have specific departmental priorities, have extreme dollar limitations, and are short-term). A study conducted by Dr. Janine Pease in 2003, and discussed above, reports on 50 language immersion projects in Indian Country and documents the serious challenges language programs have in acquiring sustained support:

- American Indian language revitalization programs are a difficult fit for programs most often designed for other language groups, Hispanic serving schools, colleges and communities.
- Language programs funding is several federal agencies have a severe limitation in funding, making competition stiff and discouraging applications altogether.
- Grant terms of three to five years limit the language programs sustainability, thereby limiting language learning as well.

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<sup>2</sup>Reyhner, Jon. "Indigenous Language Immersion Schools for Strong Indigenous Identities." Northern Arizona University. 2011. Page 8-10.

- Granting agencies have little or no support for planning or start-up costs; language programs benefit from plans well-done and substantial startup cost support.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these difficulties, some excellent programs are in place at Tribal Colleges, which can serve as models for others.

- **Aaniiih Nakoda College's White Clay Immersion School**, our own highly successful full-day immersion school, on the ANC campus, for kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade – the successes and challenges of our program are discussed above.
- **Little Big Horn College and Fort Peck Community College** in Montana have developed a tribal languages acquisition program using the Plains Indian Sign Language as the means for learning and using four hundred terms and phrases in the Crow, Nakona (Assiniboine) and Dakota languages. This initiative has classroom strategies, DVD for viewing at home on the TV and CD for listening in the car or on mobile listening devices.
- **The Piegan Institute of Browning MT** developed three K-8 language immersion schools: Cuts Wood, Moccasin Flat and Lost Child. The schools instruct all subjects in the Blackfeet language. Founder Darrell Kipp says, *"the school's graduates are the first young fluent speakers of the Blackfeet language in a generation...the school is not only resuscitating the language, but also help to preserve Blackfeet culture"*
- At **Turtle Mountain Community College** in Belcourt, North Dakota, a key institutional goal is for all college employees to engage in 100 hours of language instruction, with 20 percent of staff reaching fluency.
- **Aaniiih Nakoda College and six other TCUs** in Montana have collaborated in the Learning Lodge Institute to develop best practices in language teaching and to create a certification process to enable language instructors to teach in public school classrooms.
- **Oglala Lakota College**, in Kyle, South Dakota, has also established a successful k-5 Lakota language immersion school, while also working to expand the number and effectiveness of language instructors through inter-departmental collaboration of the Lakota Studies and teacher training programs.

As these examples demonstrate, preserving, revitalizing, and teaching Native languages are fundamental priorities of the nation's Tribal Colleges. In fact, many were established specifically to protect and preserve a tribe's language. Over the years, the TCUs have broadened their programming beyond college-aged students to impact younger children.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid. Pease-Pretty On Top, Janine. 2003

## Closing Recommendations

Mr. Chairman, I join President Shortbull and all of the Tribal Colleges, in making these recommendations:

- (1) **Include Senator Tester's TCU language research provisions:** The Committee should include the important Tribal College Native language research and education programs, which he included in legislation he introduced in the 110 and 111<sup>th</sup> Congresses as part of THE PATH legislation, as an amendment to S. 1948. To revitalize our languages, we must work at all levels, pre-K to college, and we must continue to expand critically needed Native language research.

More support is needed for Native language immersion programs, classes, community-based programs, and enrichment activities. However, equally important is the need to invest wisely in research and pedagogy and how Native Language use improves the academic achievement of Native American students. Tribal Colleges simply cannot continue to be asked to do more with less.

- (2) **Increase ANA language grant periods:** To achieve significant results that will truly impact the future of our people, the DHHS-ANA language grant program should be modified: rather than awarding grants for a period of three years, grants should be awarded for a period of 10 years. Alternatively, DHHS-ANA could adopt the model used with success by the National Science Foundation. NSF currently makes awards under its Tribal College and University program for period of five years, with the option to award an additional 5-year grant upon a demonstration of adequate progress. NSF has determined that to address systemic challenges, sustainable funding for at least 10 years is needed.

In closing, I will simply echo words of frustration, which I heard from many members of the Committee during your hearing last week on American Indian higher education: it is so incredibly frustrating to know that the need is so very great and the models of success exist; to know that Tribal Colleges – more so than any other entities -- are working every day to transform Indian Country, achieving success but being rewarded only with flat-line or decreased funding; to be asked by our people, the Administration, and Congress to do more and more with less and less. We are accountable institutions. We need the Administration to be accountable as well.

Mr. Chairman, our struggles will continue. We need your help and that of the Administration not just to acknowledge the existence of treaties and the federal trust responsibility, but to take concrete action – starting right now -- to advance the proven successes of the Tribal Colleges and increase our capacity to do even more for the betterment of Indian Country. Thank you.