

Hearing
Committee on Indian Affairs
United States Senate
July 20, 2000
Russell Senate Bldg. Room 485
S. 2688- A Bill to Amend the Native American Languages Act
Testimony of Ms. Namaka Rawlins
Director, Aha Punana Leo, Inc.

Aloha e Ka Lunahoomalu o keia halawai hoolohe pila a hoakeiki hanau o ka aina o Hawaii, e Ke Kenekoa Inouye, Aloha no hoi e Ke Kenekoa Akaka, lei ai no na kupuna kahiko o kaua, a me na lala a pau o keia komike hanohano nona ke kuleana o ka malama i ka pono o na kini lahui oiwi mai ka la hiki i ke kai pae opua o ka Akelanika a hiki i na kai lana malie o ka Pakipika, aloha oukou a nui loa.

(Aloha Moderator of this hearing and fellow child born of the lands of Hawaii, Senator Inouye, Aloha, also, to Senator Akaka, a precious lei for the ancient ancestors that we share, and to all members of this distinguished committee whose responsibility is to serve the many indigenous peoples from the rising of the sun over the cloud banked horizon seas of the Atlantic to the softly floating seas of the Pacific, my heartfelt greeting to all of you.)

My name is Namaka Rawlins. I am the director of the non-profit Native Hawaiian language educational organization, the Aha Punana Leo, Inc.

I thank Dr. Silva for providing information on both of our organizations and our consortium. Like Ka Haka Ula O Keelikolani College, the Aha Punana Leo strongly supports this bill and commits to carrying out the responsibilities given to us in the bill. Senator Inouye, I thank you for introducing this bill to amend the Native American Languages Act. Thank you Senator Akaka and other co-sponsors. Senator Inouye, your opening remarks introducing this bill speaks to the heart of the bill and brings honor to the work that we do in keeping our indigenous language and culture alive, for as you pointed out, *the ability to maintain and preserve the culture and traditions of a people is directly tied to the perpetuation of native languages*. The amendments further the commitment of the federal government to reverse language loss by supporting an educational approach to ensure academic success for Native American students based on indigenous language use in education. We see the responsibilities given to the Alaska Native Language Center as complementing what we do in our consortium. Our chants and oral literature must be recorded, the vocabulary and grammar collected and made accessible to allow us to interpret these chants. We must make sure that our tapes and existing recordings do not deteriorate but that they are preserved using the latest technology. The Alaska Native Language Center has expertise in these areas and many more relating to the collection and preservation of our languages for many generations yet to come.

Our consortium expertise is in applying resources to bring our language to life today. We start with schools as the central gathering place, and then extend the language into the home, community and work place. We are already working as the major national resource for Language Survival Nests and Language Survival Schools. We believe that we can continue to provide leadership while continuing our practice of coordinating work with others as we did in the language education strands of the 1999 World Indigenous People's Conference on Education held in our small city of Hilo. Some 5,000 indigenous people from all over the world came to Hilo for that conference with the single largest number of participants attending indigenous language education workshops.

I would like to emphasize a few points. First, our preschools and laboratory schools are having great success in revitalizing Hawaiian and reaching high academic standards. They are also the most divergent from standard public education in Hawaii and the sites that make most full use of the Hawaiian language. I totally support the concept stated in the bill that one of the functions of the schools supported in this bill is to serve as local and national models for the education of Native American children. This bill should not simply provide supplemental funds for standard public schools that want to include Native American language enrichment courses, but instead create totally new schools and systems that can demonstrate what our Native people can do using our own language and culture as the basis for our contemporary education. In doing this, we can share the resources, systems, and policies that we create with the standard public schools to effectuate positive change. I am very pleased that this bill provides us with the full resources to develop schools that can be models in their own tribal areas.

Second, I want to emphasize that creating these schools is very, very hard work, physically, mentally, and emotionally. In developing these schools we are forced to look to our ancestors, our elders, and within ourselves. It does not happen over night. It requires us to lay the new foundation, battle opposition, sometimes with our own people, and get it going. I support communities beginning first and then obtaining federal funding once they have started. This is how we began. This will demonstrate the commitment to make change.

Third, this type of education needs to be recognized as distinct from standard programs such as Title VII, Bilingual education. This is an innovative approach to increase fluency and academic success based on language and culture of Native Americans.

I believe that it is important to give some personal testimony regarding the Hawaiian language. Our Hawaiian language has only one tiny community of about 200 people on a remote private island that still use the language every day. Elsewhere, we only have a few elders left. My father, who is eighty, and mother, who is seventy-six, are not able to speak Hawaiian fluently. I learned the language through Ka Haka Ula O Keelikolani College's aggressive course work as have my two sons, both of whom were too old to participate in the Hawaiian Language Nest movement. My sons learned because of the effect of the Punana Leo language movement on the general Hawaiian community. Our Punana Leo business is conducted in Hawaiian and even our computers are in Hawaiian. Except for the few native speakers working with us, no one in our offices or schools grew up speaking Hawaiian. Most of our workers are parents of children in our language nests and language survival schools. Like myself, they learned Hawaiian in college and are proficient enough that they can use Hawaiian in school and offices and in home life. There are even some families where parents learned Hawaiian and whose children are raised speaking Hawaiian. Dr. Wilson, beside me, and his wife, was the first family to do this in Hawaii.

I also want to emphasize that we are pursuing the revitalization of our language and culture because we value them as something of unequaled importance. We did not begin our programs with the goal of using our language to make our children academically or cognitively gifted. We started these schools because we truly value our Hawaiian language and culture and wish the same for our children. We know we are succeeding when our graduates that return to the "nest" to help the younger ones learn.

I personally believe that many of our Native Hawaiian students who do poorly in school, who refuse to speak standard English and use Pidgin English with a few Hawaiian words mixed in with it, are doing so because they have the same values that I do. I believe that they are consciously or unconsciously rejecting mainstream education because they see mainstream education as taking away what little they have left of their language and

culture. They have every reason to be resistant to the schools because, historically, the schools prohibited our language and they continue to subordinate our language and culture in subtle and not so subtle ways today. This not only creates strong resentment, it also, ironically, calculates a fear that learning too much of our language and culture may make us “less intelligent”.

Our Punana Leo schools meet these negative feelings head on by providing our children their language and culture through education. We are showing that knowing our language and culture is not an academic barrier. Instead, full use of our language in school can give native children higher achievement than the standard schools. We are also showing that we can teach a higher standard of English, gaining positive attitudes towards English. Unlike the Bilingual approach in teaching English for immigrant learners, we teach English to enhance our Hawaiian base. We do not give up on our own language, as we are not immigrants.

The other members here today asked that I show short video clips of our schools and the work with our children. You will see first our Punana Leo Hawaiian Language Survival Nests and then some footage from elementary and our laboratory school, Nawahiokalaniopuu. The first graduating class, in 1999, had five young pioneers, including Dr. Wilson’s son Hulilau.

Mahalo nui loa, thank you very much senators for giving me the opportunity to testify in support of this bill.