

**Testimony of William R. Rhodes, Governor of Gila River Indian Community  
before the  
House Education and Labor Committee, Subcommittee on Early Childhood,  
Elementary and Secondary Education  
on "The No Child Left Behind Act's Impact on Indian Education"**

Field Hearing – Sacaton, Arizona  
April 28, 2007

On behalf of Gila River Indian Community, thank you, Chairman Kildee, Congressman Grijalva, and other distinguished Members of the Subcommittee for this opportunity to submit testimony to the Subcommittee on the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) on Gila River Indian Community ("the Community"). I am Governor William Rhodes of the Gila River Indian Community.

Overall, the Community is optimistic that the policies underlying NCLB can lead to improved academic achievement of children across the country, and supports the law's reauthorization. We want our children, too, to benefit from NCLB and to improve their academic achievement. Based on our experience with the implementation of NCLB, however, the Community respectfully requests that the Subcommittee give careful consideration to ensuring that the reauthorization of NCLB provides a better fit for Indian children and Indian communities. As described further in this testimony, we want Indian tribes and Indian communities to be more involved in NCLB programs, and offer suggestions for ways to improve NCLB for Indian students for consideration by the Subcommittee.

As stated, we support the overarching goals of NCLB. We see, however, many areas for improvement in the law. For instance, we view the Tribally Controlled Schools Act and the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, which allow Indian tribes to determine for themselves their educational needs and build their programs around those needs, as models of what is working in Indian Country. As Congress has recognized, Indian education is not a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all proposition. Instead, these two Acts give each Tribe the right to determine their own unique needs, and our schools are better off for having been permitted to exercise the self-determination and control that Congress provided in these statutes. We seek this same type of community involvement and authority in the reauthorized NCLB.

The Subcommittee should understand that the Community does not view NCLB as being in tension with this local control principle. Rather, we ask the Subcommittee to recognize that for the NCLB to be fully successful in Indian country, the law must take into account the unique challenges it presents for Indian students and tribal educators.

This testimony focuses on the following four areas that we believe are in need of attention in the discussion of the reauthorization of the NCLB and what it means for Indian Country, based on the experience we have had at the Community: (1) the need for improved teacher recruitment and retention, (2) the need for enhanced tribal – state consultation, (3) the

importance of allowing for native languages and culture as part of the curriculum, and (4) the need for strategies for improved student retention, including the role of parents in ensuring student attendance.

## **I. Teacher recruitment and retention.**

The Community, like many other Indian tribes across the country, has sought to staff its educational institutions with “highly qualified teachers” as mandated by NCLB. This has created problems that are not easily resolved. Traditionally, reservation schools have always had difficulty recruiting teachers of any kind, let alone ones that satisfy the definition of highly qualified. While the pay scale at the schools in our Community is competitive with many other area schools, this is not the solution to the problem. Potential teachers are not attracted to reservation schools because these schools are often isolated and rural, adding challenges of travel time and transportation cost for teachers.

Moreover, once teachers are recruited, the problem does not end there. The Community has experienced a significant problem with teacher retention. Quite frankly, some teachers, especially new teachers, tend to be hired because their lack of experience keeps them from finding work in more desirable locations. It isn’t unusual for these teachers to gain some experience at our schools and then leave the school. As a result, the Community is in a constant state of searching for eligible teachers, knowing that, once recruited, they will almost certainly leave within a few short years.

As an illustrative example, Vah-Ki Middle School on reservation has great difficulty finding highly qualified teachers and must use “emergency certified” teachers. Emergency certification is only good for one year, and if that teacher proves effective in working with the students, but has not acquired 6 required semester hours of coursework, they cannot be recertified. The school now only has 6 highly qualified teachers, and 8 who are emergency certified or have a substitute teacher license. During the 2005-06 school year, this school had to delay opening day by a week because there were not enough teachers hired. The opening of school was chaotic, with most classes being taught by substitutes.

We think the Title II teacher quality programs can be tailored to help Indian communities improve their ability to attract highly qualified teachers and to retain the teachers we currently have. Congress should place a priority on supporting activities that address the needs of teachers and schools serving Indian students. NCLB should require States to consider the needs of these schools when distributing Title II grant funds. For instance, grants under Title II can support higher education partnerships that improve preservice education for those becoming teachers of Indian students and can support activities that address the professional development needs of teachers already in our schools. Providing these services helps us address the professional needs of our teachers so that they experience success in our classrooms and feel commitment to our students and communities.

Teachers need consistent training, some of which the Community's Education Department provides. In 2004, the Tribe adopted as an annual event a reservation-wide teacher in-service. At this event, Community teachers share best practices in working with Community students; Community leaders provide cultural insights to teachers; and professionals provide training in categories such as math teaching skills, classroom management, and teaching impoverished populations. Additionally, annual truancy prevention training is provided, as well as in-services on choosing and adopting common core textbooks across the Community.

## **II. States should be explicitly required under law to consult with tribes on NCLB.**

We want NCLB to work for our students and we can provide useful suggestions on how to successfully implement the law within the unique nature of our Indian communities. Indian tribes need to have a greater voice and role in the decisions made at the State level under NCLB. State education officials should be required to consult with Indian educational representatives in the development of state accountability systems. They should also consider the needs of Indian parents when developing parent involvement programs. The Community is trying to implement state standards and, toward that end, would benefit from increased coordination with the State and among the Community's schools. The Community continues to work closely with our school administrators and teachers to move toward the goal of "school unification." Such unification includes adopting universal policies regarding academics, school safety, health and nutrition, student tracking, and emergency response. Increased communication between the state and the Community would help all of our schools better understand that funding agencies fully support what we are trying to achieve and expect compliance with the policies and standards of NCLB. The Community does not demand anything from its schools that they should not be doing anyway, and simply wants to ensure that continuity and structure for our students. Greater coordination between the State, the tribe and our schools would go a long way toward advancing this effort.

There should be stronger emphasis in encouraging states, tribal governments and communities to work together in developing appropriate educational standards and related assessments. Specifically, NCLB should be amended to require that states involve tribes located within their boundaries in the development of state assessments. To facilitate enhanced cooperation, NCLB can be strengthened to provide resources for collaboration among tribes, states, and the Federal Government to allow for increased opportunities in the development of standards that recognize the cultural backgrounds of native students.

## **III. Native language and culture as part of the curriculum.**

The Community's schools incorporate native language and culture into the curriculum. The Community feels very strongly that these aspects of the curriculum are vitally important to

maintaining tribal culture for future generations. While current NCLB requirements often make it difficult to meet our native language and culture education goals, the Community wants to continue these types of programs and at the same time we work to increase the academic achievement of our students.

Title VII of NCLB recognizes that native children have unique educational needs due to their cultures and backgrounds. Native children should be given every opportunity to obtain a comprehensive education that allows them to succeed and contribute in building healthy communities. Native learning is strengthened through instruction that integrates basic skills with traditional cultural practices and embraces the knowledge of the environment, native fine arts and crafts, leadership, character and citizenship. Strengthening the NCLB to provide a well-rounded education for all children that builds upon our unique culture and language will further federal policy on several levels and ensure long-term success.

Title III and Title VII currently allow for Native language instruction. However, these provisions should be strengthened so that schools that are successfully achieving their educational goals and meeting the academic standards receive the support they need to continue these programs. Research shows that native children perform better academically when they are taught in a manner that is consistent with their traditions, languages and cultures. See, for example, Pease-Pretty On Top, Janine, *Native Language Immersion: Innovative Education for Children and Families*. Denver: American Indian College Fund, 2000.

The GRIC Education Department has recently hired a Culture Coordinator who will work closely with the schools with strong culture programs and other interested Community members to develop a standard culture curriculum, and share that curriculum with our schools that do not yet have such strong programs. For example, a few of the Community schools have strong culture programs—students at one of these schools are fluent in O’odham language and consistently study and practice the Community’s culture. It is desired that all of the Community schools become as proficient in teaching the Gila River Indian Community culture and language, and for all students to demonstrate knowledge of the Community’s culture and language. One challenge is that the Community is comprised of two tribes: Pima and Maricopa. The Culture Coordinator will ensure that both cultures and languages are incorporated in the culture curriculum. Given the proven link between teaching Native languages and student achievement, we believe these programs, long term, will improve student achievement and strengthen our student’s lifelong connection to learning.

#### **IV. Parenting initiatives and impacts on student attendance and performance.**

The Community faces an alarming student success and retention situation. For instance, at Community schools, the statistics reveal that:

1. High school graduation rate of Community students is approximately at 58%; and
2. High school students have a truancy rate at roughly 56%.

The Community leaders have begun the process of addressing and remedying these issues. Last year, we conducted a Community Outreach Conference that aggressively and

effectively promoted the value of education. Sessions were selected and designed to provide information to Community members as family units, and included in those sessions were workshops from the GRIC school administrators to educate parents on how their efforts are necessary and complement the effort of educators in keeping our students in school and on track toward high school graduation. It is too soon to tell the direct impact of our conference on student attendance and performance. However, given the truancy and drop-out rates at the Community, this event has been endorsed by tribal leaders as an annual occurrence in order to address this significant problem.

While there are a number of things the Community's government can do to address this problem, such as putting pressure on schools to take stronger steps to ensure attendance and strengthening enforcement of the Community Children's Courts' revised truancy ordinance, we believe NCLB can be strengthened by allowing increased opportunities for parents, families, and native communities to become more involved in their children's schools and in the development of their educational programs. Schools are successful when parents, families, tribes and the local communities are actively involved and engaged in the school's programs and activities.

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Thank you, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, and we stand ready to answer any questions you may have or to supply any additional information.