

THE CONFEDERATED TRIBES LANGUAGE LESSON

Language News

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Part Two

Rationale and Needs for Stabilizing Indigenous Languages

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Self-Determination

President Richard Nixon enunciated the current United States policy of American Indian and Alaska Native self-determination in response to the expressed desires of American Indian and Alaska Native peoples. In a special message to Congress on Indian affairs in 1971, he wrote:

the story of the Indian in America is something more than the record of the white man's frequent aggression, broken agreements, intermittent remorse and prolonged failure. It is a record also of endurance, of survival, of adaptation and creativity in the face of overwhelming obstacles. It is a record of enormous contributions to this country — to its art and culture, to its strength and spirit, to its sense of history and its sense of purpose.

It is long past time that the Indian policies of the Federal government began to recognize and build upon the capacities and insights of the Indian people. Both as a matter of justice and as a matter of enlightened social policy, we must begin to act on the basis of what the Indians themselves have long been telling us. The time has come to break decisively with the past and to create the conditions for a new era in which the Indian future is determined by Indian acts and Indian decisions. (Nixon, p. 565)

This policy was operationalized in regard to education with the passage of the Indian Education Act in 1972 and the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act in 1975. In the face of subsequent changes in administration, budget cuts, and doubts about the place of minorities in the United States, this policy of self-determination has survived and led to American Indians and Alaska Natives reasserting their right to control the education of their children and maintain their languages and cultures.

Native American Languages Act

The Congress of the United States in the Native American Languages Act of 1990 confirmed these aspirations by recognizing that the status of the cultures and languages of Native Americans is unique and the United States has the responsibility to act together with Native Americans to ensure the survival of these unique cultures and languages. It accorded special status to Native Americans in the United States, a status that recognizes distinct cultural and political rights, including the right to continue separate identities. Congress found the traditional languages of Native Americans to be an integral part of their cultures and identities and form the basic medium for the transmission, and thus survival, of Native American cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions, and values. Furthermore Congress found convincing evidence that student achievement and performance, community and school pride, and educational opportunity are clearly and directly tied to respect for, and support of, the first language of the child. Languages are the means of communication for the full range of human experiences and are critical to the survival of cultural and political integrity of any people. Congress thus declared it is the policy of the United States to preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages. Congress encouraged and supported the use of Native American languages as a medium of instruction in order to encourage and support Native American language survival, educational opportunity, increased student success and performance, increased student awareness and knowledge of their culture and history, and encouraged State and local education programs to work with Native American parents, educators, Indian tribes, and other Native American governing bodies in the implementation of programs to put this policy into effect. HREF="#N2"

INAR Task Force & White House Conference

In 1990 the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Education, using former President George Bush's six National Education Goals as a starting point, established a set of ten educational goals to guide the improvement of all federal, tribal, private, and public schools that serve American Indians and Alaska Natives and their communities. Goal 2 reads "By the year 2000 all schools will offer Native students the opportunity to maintain and develop their tribal languages and will create a multicultural

environment that enhances the many cultures represented in the school." The Task Force's co-chairs wrote:

The Task Force believes that a well-educated American Indian and Alaska Native citizenry and a renewal of the language and culture base of the American Native community will strengthen self-determination and economic well-being and will allow the Native community to contribute to building a stronger nation — an America that can compete with other nations and contribute to the world's economies and cultures. (Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, 1991, p. iv)

They identified as one of the reasons that Indian Nations are at risk the fact that "schools have discouraged the use of Native languages... [with the result that] the language and culture base of the American Native are rapidly eroding." The Task Force found, "schools that respect and support a student's language and culture are significantly more successful in educating those students" (p. 16) and recommended "establishing the promotion of students' tribal language and culture as a responsibility of the school" (p. 22).

Following up the work of the Task Force, the first-ever White House Conference on Indian Education was held in Washington, D.C. in 1992. Building on the work of state pre-conferences, the White House Conference delegates adopted 113 resolutions covering a variety of topics. Under Topic 7, Native Languages and Culture, the Conference called on "the President of the United States and the U.S. Congress to strengthen and increase support for the language and culture of American Indians and Alaskan Natives" through a number of actions including ensuring "the strengthening, preservation, and revival of native languages and cultures [and] to permit students to learn their tribal language as a first or second language" (Summary of Resolutions, 1992).



International Year for the World's Indigenous People

The concerns of American Indians and Alaska Natives are not unique, but rather concerns of indigenous peoples worldwide. In recognition of this fact, the United Nations has recognized both the predicament and aspirations of indigenous minorities by declaring 1993 the International Year for the World's Indigenous People. The 1993 UN Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms their right to self-determination and "the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs," including their languages. The current policy of Indian Self-Determination in the United States, while not perfect, approaches the ideal of freedom and cultural democracy envisioned in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The renewal of traditional Native cultures in and out of school is re-establishing a sense of community and is fighting the materialistic, hedonistic, and individualistic forces of the popular culture. American Indian concerns about land, culture, and community are concerns that all Americans need to share if we are to assure a future for our children. The work of the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force and the White House Conference on Indian Education shows the results of Indian people expressing to the U.S. government their vision of how their children should be educated while the work of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations shows the international scope of this vision. They want both educational excellence and preservation of their languages and cultures.

Tribal Language Policies

Non-Indian Americans need to respect and support American Indian and Alaska Native peoples' rejection of the old assimilationist approach to Indian education. This rejection can be found in the educational policies of various tribes, including Navajo, Northern Ute, and Pasqua Yaqui policies passed in 1984. Then Tribal Chairman Peterson Zah declared in the preface to the Navajo tribal education policies,

We believe that an excellent education can produce achievement in the basic academic skills and skills required by modern technology and still educate young Navajo citizens in their language, history, government and

culture. (Navajo Division of Education, 1984, p. vii)

These policies call for local control, parental involvement, and Navajo language instruction. They state,

The Navajo language is an essential element of the life, culture and identity of the Navajo people. The Navajo Nation recognizes the importance of preserving and perpetuating that language to the survival of the Nation. Instruction in the Navajo language shall be made available for all grade levels in all schools serving the Navajo Nation. (Navajo Division of Education, 1984, p. 9)

Anita Pfeiffer and Wayne Holm of the Navajo Nation's Education Division declared in 1994, "that our work with the language has not been work just on language in isolation. It has been part of a far larger effort to restore personal and societal wellness" (p. 35). Language wellness is a measure of tribal societal wellness. Without access to their mother-tongue, Native children are cut off from their elders and the traditional community and family values that are their rightful heritage.

The Northern Ute Tribal Business Committee passed resolution 84-96 in 1984 declaring,

the Ute language is a living and vital language that has the ability to match any other in the world for expressiveness and beauty. Our language is capable of lexical expansion into modern conceptual fields such as the field of politics, economics, mathematics and science.

Be it known that the Ute language shall be recognized as our first language, and the English language will be recognized as our second language. We assert that our students are fully capable of developing fluency in our mother tongue and the foreign English language and we further assert that a higher level of Ute mastery results in higher levels of English skills. (Northern Ute, 1985, p. 16)

The resolution also requires Ute language instruction in preschool through twelfth grade.

The language policy passed by the Pascua Yaqui Tribal Council holds that "Our ancient language is the foundation of our cultural and spiritual heritage" and declares that "all aspects of the educational process shall reflect the beauty of our Yaqui language, culture and values" (Pascua, 1984, p. 1).

Conclusion

This rationale and needs statement in no way completely describes the needs and concerns of all nations and peoples whose languages are endangered. It is a collective work done by representatives of several nations, educators, and others involved in American Indian and Alaska Native education. We apologize to you if your concerns are not voiced in this document, but offer that this will be an ongoing process and we would appreciate your comments and advice. Several courses of action could greatly assist American Indian communities in developing the effective right to maintain their languages. Such actions include: 1) fostering of new, innovative, community-based approaches to strengthen and stabilize threatened languages; 2) directing more research efforts toward analyzing community-based successes in resisting loss of Native American languages and other minority languages as well; 3) fostering communication and partnerships between communities and organizations trying new approaches to maintaining languages; and 4) promotion of heightened consciousness of the catastrophic effects of language loss, both among members of language minority populations and among members of the mainstream population. Unfortunately, the human and financial resources needed to stabilize or restore American Indian languages extend beyond the resources of nearly all Indian communities. Because of the federal and state governments' long-term role in creating the present endangered status of American Indian and Alaska Native languages, it is appropriate for them to provide assistance in helping American Indians and Alaska Natives to stabilize and renew their languages.

Notes:

This paper reflects the input of the Rationale and Needs Group, which met on November 17, 1994, and consisted of Elizabeth Brandt, Arizona State University; Damon Clarke, Northern Arizona University; Willard Gilbert, Northern Arizona University; Juana Jose, Office of Indian Education, Arizona Department of Education; Alvin Kelly, Quechan Nation, Yuma; Paul Platero, Navajo Division of Education; Kathryn Stevens, Director, Office of Indian Education, Arizona Department of Education. Thanks also go to Gary D. McLean and Ed Tennant for their contributions to this document. The text of the Native American Languages Act can be found starting on page 69. (of the Stabilizing Indigenous Languages book Printed by Northern Arizona University)..."

(For the List of references please see <http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/miscpubs/stabilize/i-needs/rationale.htm>)

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