



Window Rock Unified School District

Tsehootsooi Dine Bi'Olta'

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TESTIMONY
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR AND
PENSIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE
HEARING ON "NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: IMPROVING EDUCATION
IN INDIAN COUNTRY"

Statement of

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(Immersion School)**

August 10, 2007

Y'at'eeh members of the Committee: I am Maggie Benally, an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation and the principal of Tsehootsooi Dine Bi'Olta', Navajo Immersion School. On behalf of the Window Rock Unified School District, the Navajo Nation, the National Alliance to Save Native Languages, and National Indian Education Association (NIEA), I would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions on "No Child Left Behind: Improving Education in Indian Country". My testimony is to provide information in regards to improving No Child Left Behind to best meet the needs of Native American students.

The Window Rock Unified School District views No Child Left Behind (NCLB) as an opportunity and improvement of the educational services that the district provides to the students through standards based learning and cultural based education. The district accepted the challenge outlined in NCLB and began the improvement effort in SY 2002-2003 through the design and implementation of the district's effort entitled " Embracing Change for Student Learning'.

The district's framework for exemplary education used the local community philosophy of lifelong learning and research approach to create a six-step process for continuous reform. The district also created a strategic plan: 6 Core Principles of Learning that includes action plans to align all district activities:

- I. Exemplary, Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment
- II. Exemplary Student Performance
- III. Exemplary Staff Performance
- IV. Strong Parental and Community Relations
- V. Safe, Efficient, and Supportive School Environment
- VI. Efficient and Supportive Learning Operations

It is through the framework and core principles of learning that the district work toward achieving its mission:

"We exist to ensure relevant learning for all students to be successful in a multicultural society"

Ts4hootsooi Dine Bi'Olta' embrace the challenge to meet the Arizona academic content standards with instruction in the Dine and English languages.

Our school currently serves approximately 240 students in grades K through 8. The goals of the school is to provide opportunities in revitalizing the Dine (Navajo) language for families that do not speak the Din4 language in the home and maintain the Din4 language for families who do speak the Din4 language in the home. The district opened up a

Din4 language immersion kindergarten classroom within an English medium school in 1986. Presently, it is a K-8 school with plans to expand the school to include grades 9-12 and plans to develop an Early College for students in grades 6 – 12.

Tsehootsooi Dine Bi'Olta' uses the immersion strategy to teach the Arizona's academic content standards in reading, writing and mathematics using a standards-based approach to learning and teaching. The Dine is the primary language of instruction for a greater percentage of the student's K-8 educational experience. The school begins with full Dine language instruction at K-1 and a gradual increase of English language instruction by 10% per grade level from grades 2-8. At K-1, students are immersed in the Dine language to reach a level of proficiency to develop the cognitive academic language (CALP) in Dine. CALP is used to teach the Arizona's academic content standards. At Grade 2, students are instructed in the English language where the gradual transfer of CALP takes place from Din4 to English. By the end of 8th grade students receive equal instruction of Arizona's academic content standards in reading, writing and mathematics in the Din4 and English languages.

The success of the school is evidenced by the proficiency level established by students in grades K-2. These students have a higher proficiency level on Dine as compared to their peers at the same age level when the school was a program within an English medium school.

The curriculum developed and implemented at Tsehootsooi Dine Bi'Olta' addresses the challenging state academic content standards in the core subjects. These standards are taught through rich content in Dine culture and language. Benchmark assessments are used to measure student progress in Dine and English languages. The teachers developed assessments in the heritage language showed that these assessments are highly reliable and valid. Students do as well or better than their peers taught only in English. This information proves that students who are instructed in two languages have a positive effect on student academic achievement.

Window Rock Unified School District #8 agrees with the goals of NCLB for Native American students. We do not make excuses but as a district and a school, we make every effort that students at Tsehootsooi Dine Bi'Olta' and students in the other schools in the district are provided with quality education to increase student success and performance with integration of language and culture into standards based instruction.

By learning and instructed in two different languages, students develop higher order thinking skills (learning content) and develop a higher level of both Dine and English language proficiency. Student learn to speak,

read, write and think in the Dine language – ensuring the survival of the language for the future generations.

For the past three years, Ts4hootsoo7 Din4 Bi'Olta' met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) where other schools in the district were inconsistent. This shows that the goals of NCLB are not incompatible with those of the local community that the school serves, nor are our communities goals incompatible with NCLB. The fact is that the educational goals for our children can be achieved by validating our educational needs – to ensure the survival of the unique Dine culture and language.

Tsehootsooi Dine Bi'Olta' is one of the four immersion schools in a nationwide longitudinal study of immersion students. Current data states that that while there is a lag in achievement of primary immersion students, intermediate and secondary students not only reach the “meets” level of performance, but often “exceed.” Additionally, initial studies have proven that none of the immersion students drop out of high school, but rather go on to pursue higher education opportunities.

There are many challenges that the No Child Left Behind poses to our effort. Continued support is needed to provide a cultural and linguistic related educational programs.

The lack of acknowledgement of the importance of the components of the Native American Languages Acts (NALA) policy is evidence in the state plans. However programs such as Structured English immersion under Title III is the only program of instruction for English learners.

It is very difficult for school districts serving native students to find teachers who are fluent speakers and can teach in their native languages and also meet the Highly Qualified requirements. For the past year and again this school year and with plans to expand to grades 9-12, teachers are teaching more than one subject areas. Under the current requirements, teachers would have to be endorsed in the subject areas they are teaching along with the regular teacher certification.

The immersion school in Window Rock Unified school district is the only one of its kind on the Navajo Nation. Other communities and public schools on the Navajo Nation and across Indian Country through the United States including Hawaii have the desire to revitalize and maintain their heritage language, however contrary state policies hinder their abilities to do so and/or limited to what they can do. The Tsehootsooi Dine Bi'Olta' has been in existence for 20 years, operating for over a decade before the passage of Proposition 203. The program has enabled students to become proficient speakers of both Dine and English and as stated earlier have higher graduation rate and higher education success. Yet in our state, school districts required students to participate

in Structured English Immersion if they come from a home where the primary language is other than English. Policies such as Proposition 203 devalue the learning of the Dine language. It sends a wrong message to parents and other stakeholders that the only way to succeed is through the English. The educational performance of our students would not have been an issue today if knowing and speaking English were all that our students needed to succeed.

The information provides us with enough evidence that support be given to culturally appropriate school systems that provide the opportunity for our children to become speakers and thinkers in their native language, a foundation that will lead to academic achievement.