

**TESTIMONY OF A. BRIAN WALLACE
CHAIRMAN THE WASHOE TRIBE OF NEVADA AND CALIFORNIA
WITH STEVEN JAMES, PRESIDENT, WASHIW 'ITLU GAWGAYAY AND
THELMA TRIPP, BOARD MEMBER, WASHIW 'ITLU GAWGAYAY**

BEFORE THE SENATE INDIAN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

ON S.2688; NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGES ACT AMENDMENTS OF 2000

Introduction:

The Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California is pleased to have the opportunity to testify before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs in support of S. 2688, to amend the Native American Languages Act to provide support for Native American Language Survival Schools. The Washoe Tribe, and Washiw 'itlu Gawgayay, a 501 (c)3 non profit corporation, in February of 1997, opened the doors on a language immersion school now attended by 20 students pre-K through 9th grade. (It took three years of preparation in our communities before we were ready to open our community school.) In the three and one-half years we have operated the school, we have both made a substantial renewal of our language and the created a new Washoe paradigm for indigenous education by educating our students well in this context. The school has been a great success, and every day those of us who participate in this community of learners are cognizant of the fact that we are making history.

Background of the Washoe Tribe

The center of the Washoe ancestral homeland is Da'aw 'a:ga'a, 'The Lake (Tahoe), and for 10,000 the Washoe people occupied and controlled over 4,000 square miles of land in and around Lake Tahoe and the Sierra Nevada Crest. Following the California Gold Rush and the discovery of the Comstock silver load, the Washoe Tribe was removed from the Lake Tahoe Basin and forced on to one 40 acre parcel of land located in the Carson Valley, and the population was reduced from 3,000 Tribal members to 300 members. Since that time, the Tribe has struggled to reestablish its population, homelands, and culture. Currently Washoe Tribal lands, which total approximately 70,000 acres, are located are located in 8 different counties in western Nevada and eastern California, and there are now 1,587 Tribal members and 545 school aged (K-12) children. The Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California is a federally recognized Indian tribe and the governing body of the Tribe is organized under the provisions of the Indian Reorganization Act of June 18, 1934 (48 State 984). The Tribal government provides numerous services ranging from law enforcement and courts to environmental and cultural resource protection to social welfare and education programs.

The Washoe People, called the Washishiw 'Washoe People from Here' are of a linguistic group considered unique because the Washoe language is not related to surrounding language families,¹ which supports that which our Elders tell us: the Washishiw have always lived on this land.

Additionally, we were among the last Native People on this continent to suffer significant contact because of the geographic barrier of the Sierra mountains to the west, and the Great Basin desert to the east.² Colonization of the Washoe homelands happened so quickly as a result of the California gold rush, that it led President Cleveland in 1887 to predict the imminent extinction of the Washoe People and abolition of Washoe tribal homelands. Since that dark time, the Washoe Tribe has focused on the following priorities; the maintenance of Washiw cultural sovereignty, protection of the freedom to express Washoe traditional lifeways, protection and repatriation of traditional tribal homelands, and the advancement of Washoe political and economic self-determination. We have not only survived but made great progress in rebuilding our nation and our culture.

Need for Support of Native Language Immersion Schools

Many Native American languages have been lost and many of the surviving languages are threatened. When we initiated our language immersion effort, the number of fluent speakers who learned the language in infancy was rapidly diminishing, with only about 90 speakers, almost all of them over the age of 50 remained. Today 11 of those speakers no longer leave tracks on the earth, and of those four were founders of the Native Language Nest in our community. Now most of our speakers are in their 80's.

From the perspective of the Washishiw, it is the complexity of indigenous thought and traditional cultural knowledge through our languages that stands to be lost. It is this complexity that speaks to the renewal of our lands and our medicinal knowledge. It is this complexity that created the great civilizations from which each modern indigenous culture springs. And today, in our fast-paced world, it is our immersion students who can now address this complexity. Today they often stand and deliver prayers in their language, it is they who can articulate the ancestral knowledge we so treasure. It is these students who are now the ambassadors of our traditions. Because we are watching these students flourish, it is our firm belief that knowledge of our culture through their ancestral language makes a proud, steady, and engaged student. We are reversing the BIA Indian boarding school policies that sought to "educate the Indian out of" ¹/₃ our ancestors and destroy our languages. Our students will not become proficient just in the industrial and domestic arts, but for the first time in history have their sights set on becoming scholars for the future.

Washiw Wagaray Mangal

'House Where Washiw is Spoken'

Conscious teaching of the Washiw language to our children and grandchildren (rather than the natural 'passing on' from one generation to another) by immersion teaching methodology was born in the Dresslerville Head Start in the Spring of 1995. By the spring of 1997, the Washoe program had opened an independent private language immersion lab school in a Tribal building made available in the Dresslerville Community of the Washoe Indian Reservation. In September 1997, Washiw Wagaray Mangal was opened in a converted convenience store with four Elder Speaker teachers, a Project Organizer, and eventually two Language Teacher's Aides.

Enrollment increased from 10 pre-K through 2nd graders in 1997 to 18 students pre-K through 7th in year two, and finally to our present student body, numbering 22 in grades pre-K through 9th grade. We are at our limit in terms of space at this time, with a growing waiting list of students interested in attending the school. Last fall we added a young Washoe tribal member with a degree in elementary education to Washiw Wagayay Mangal. First, all of the children who attend school here are fluent English speakers when they enroll. We are teaching our children and grandchildren all required academic subjects (math, literature, the sciences, history, social studies, language, and the arts) in the medium of our ancestral language, and we are pairing that with Washiw traditional cultural knowledge.

There is a Washiw word that is spoken with a lot of respect here Washiw 'itde'a 'on Washiw land'. This word embodies the Washiw traditional ways, and means 'Washiw advice, teachings, to-tell-you, to-show-you, which is the traditional way in which knowledge is passed on. This word describes teaching, but it also alludes to what a well- taught and considerate Washiw person full of respect and humility as one who understands and embodies this word will be. This word specifically describes Elders passing their knowledge on to younger relatives. This is not just a simple word, but a word that describes the Washiw philosophy of life. It is a sacred word. There are other words in the Washiw language that are also this powerful.

We are teaching in a multi-age, inter-generational collaborative and cooperative school community setting, and we are doing so in a school that is often without walls. Field work is an integral element of our curriculum because it brings the teachings alive for our children, 'taking them out onto the land to work together, to be free with their Elders to rediscover the traditions that they seek to preserve. We are constantly building field work into our curriculum. We also are constantly utilizing scholars, both Native and non-Native, such as professors from the University of Nevada and scientists in the fields of hydrology, geology, botany, ethnography, linguistics, history -- whose knowledge we look to employ for the preservation of our lands and environment for the future. We have worked extensively with the Tribal Environmental Resources Program to create a traditional plant field guide. Hand in hand, Elders and children, they are the embodiment of all that is valuable in our country.

Our students are involved in the daily development of new curriculum for our program, for while there are models we use as guides, the work we do in the classroom is made new by continually striving to do it through the Washiw language. In this way, the children see their teachers learning alongside them, and this contributes substantially to our stated goal that we develop lifelong learners in our school community.

Educational Goals

The following mission statement for the Washiw itlu gayayagy, was written in March of 1997. It includes the thinking of our founding elders and community members along with four certified teachers, two of whom are tribal members.

Recognizing that the perpetuation and renewal of the Washiw language in the academic setting is valid and vital for the preservation of indigenous language and culture, we are utilizing the

expertise of Washoe tribal Elders and traditional speakers to teach academic subjects in a setting where the Washiw language is used as the medium of instruction in an immersion language school. We will create a strong community in support of language renewal and lifelong academic success. This will include students, parents, teachers, elders, researchers, and educators involved in the Nevada public schools. The school will continue to be a site of ongoing research into language acquisition, methodology, and the Washiw language and culture. An existing library will be preserved, expanded and continue to serve the school and larger community.

Four specific objectives for Washiw 'itlu Gawgayay were articulated in April 1997 when the organization filed for Nevada State nonprofit status:

1. To conduct educational programs and studies for the Washiw Indians and the general public which will record, preserve, rejuvenate, and advance the understanding and importance of the Washiw language.
2. To research the language and history of the Washiw Indians and their ancestral peoples and promote the understanding of the philosophy, linguistics, and social and religious elements contained within the language.
3. To obtain facilities for Washiw 'itlu Gawgayay to serve as a teaching center and a depository for the archives, artifacts, and contemporary materials relating to the study of the language and history of the Washiw people.
4. To publish educational materials that enhance the study and preservation of the Washiw language and history.

The Success of the Washoe Language Immersion School

Statistics and experience shows that there is inadequate education of Washoe children in the extant public school system. This is reflective of the performance of Native American children on standardized tests nationally and their high drop out rate. The public education of our children was recognized as an abysmal failure by the Executive Order on Indian Education signed by President Clinton on August 8, 1998.

For the past three generations, the Washoe Tribe and Washoe people have continued to move forward and recover from the near genocide of the early part of this century, but our progress has been hindered by the inability of the public school system to adequately serve the Washoe student population. It has become evident that, in general, Washoe children are not served well in the public school system.⁴

In three generations of having been educated in the state and federal school system, we have an educational baseline. We are now asking you to consider that among our People there is a new paradigm--one that combines the best of our culture with the academic rigors of your system. Although some of us have been very successful: we now have Washiw educators, Washiw medical doctors, Washiw lawyers, geologists and even successful bankers and business people,

the majority of our children are not succeeding in your schools. The reasons for this lack of success have been that are well documented in anthropological and educational literature.⁵

Our children are no exception. We know there is much more. Our Elders tell us that the values of respect, of community, of working together and respecting one another, of taking care of the weak, of sharing whatever we have are the tenants of our culture. These core Washiw values need to be a part of the education we provide to our children. Our language embodies these values, these memories, if you will, and we have been instructed to not forget these things.

We are not seeking to return to the pre-contact period. Obviously our world has been changed. However, we do recognize that which is the "essence/soul/foundation"⁶ of our culture: our language. As the Hawaiian people have said before us, we do not disrespect the English language. We are not precluding the use of English and recognize the need for English language skills. Again, all of our children are fluent speakers of English before they enroll in our immersion school. We are a community now trying to bridge a break with our past. The same cultural skills, values and will that enabled the Washoe people to thrive faced with the natural environmental challenges of the homeland prior to contact--these are the skills that will enable the Washoe people to succeed in the 21st century. We can adapt and change, but we have rediscovered that there is much we bring to the table that must be incorporated in the education of our children.

We have now a community of learners in our immersion school--a community from Elders to the tiniest child, hand in hand, the way it has always been. We are once again instilling a strong sense of community and extended family in our children, and the confidence and self esteem that we see growing from within this school community is impressive. Our children are reclaiming the sense of ancestral responsibility for the care of their homelands, and have a deep understanding of environmental sciences and cultural values that we as parents were distracted from in our own education.

It is a unique perspective that we bring before you today, and it springs from our knowledge of biological well-being. We're the only people who have a perception of what it is to be truly healthy in this place, on this land. The biological destruction of our homeland has brought The Lake (Tahoe) to the brink of disaster. It has been said that Tahoe is "a totem nationally for the environment".⁷ If one looks carefully at this idea, then the United States policies that seek to mediate this destruction of the environment, to save endangered plant and animal species from the goshawk to the old growth forests should now look carefully at the protection of the cultural diversity of mankind.

We know that our traditional perspective strengthens our children. It strengthens us--their parents, and even our Elders as they tell us they are remembering things they thought they had forgotten. In the first year, all four Elder speaker teachers became literate in their ancestral language---something that is now commonplace at our school. We have some very strong evidence from educators teaching students who have matriculated from our school, and from educators who work with our program from the University of Nevada, Reno. For example, a direct quote about one of our students from his new public school teacher is, "in 15 years of teaching the first grade I have never had a better student come through my classroom... He knows

how to listen, and how to learn, and it has been a joy to teach him this year."8 This teacher actually thanked us for sending him such a model student.

I would like to share with you that we had one student who was going to be sidelined into a special education program by himself because he wasn't reading English at the end of his second grade year in a public school. His mother brought him to us, and by the end of his third grade year he was literate in Washiw. This year we have him reading in English, and testing above his grade level in mathematics. The child is not and was not differently abled. We don't know why this classification so wrongly happens to our children in public school classrooms (although we suspect racial bias is one reason), but we know that we can do better, and that taking this child out of a mainstream classroom helped him to realize his potential.

The Washishiw have a sacred duty to ensure that our children have the opportunity and skills necessary to succeed, provide benefits for themselves and their extended family and fulfill their role within Washoe society. This cannot be done if our children are not learning and are disregarding the basic traditional values of our society. What is the Washoe Tribe doing to address this critical need? The Tribe did not go to the federal government or to the state governments for a solution. Rather the Washoe Tribe and other Indian tribes have looked 'inward, and we went to our tribal elders, who are the traditional teachers in our culture.9

The Movement at Home and Abroad

Without a dime of federal assistance the Washoe Tribe established a non-profit, on reservation, school to educate our children. This school is built upon the volunteer efforts of our elders and advocates within our community. We had a potluck in February of 1994 and asked the community to gather and discuss whether or not they would like to see the language renewed, and we packed the community gym. It was concerned parents who got this going, we are the generation that didn't learn to speak Washiw. Most of our parents spoke Washiw, but had been taught not to pass this knowledge on to their children. The governmental campaign to erase our languages was pretty effective. It is our Elders who continue to lead this movement in our communities, though, and we are proud to be here today alongside them, in support of their knowledge and their generosity.

We are also humbled by being on a panel with the Hawaiian People, and with the representatives from the Piegan Institute. We always say that we are only as strong as the hand of friendship that has been extended to us, and these hands are here today, and they are strong, capable hands, and they have shared many things with us. First they encouraged us, and then they told us how to found a Language Nest. As we continued to meet and communicate, they told us what to watch out for. They watched us grow, and gave us good criticism. We have, in turn hosted others at our school--the Northern Paiute people at Pyramid Lake are teaching language in their high school and would like to found an immersion Language Nest. Last month we hosted a visit from 5 Laguna Pueblo people who also would like to found a Language Nest in their home community. They left stronger, and a story they told us about how all of our children are stars became a part of our curriculum and was re-enacted by our students for their families during our graduation ceremonies this year.

Experiences of established Native Language Nests and Native Language Survival Schools globally erase away any doubt about the effectiveness of immersion language teaching in our children's lives. We have all shared our programs successes and failures in an effort to renew our languages. When we speak of Language Nests globally, there are indigenous peoples world wide who embrace this notion, from the Catalian people in Spain and France to the Sami people in Norway to the Inuit people in Greenland to the Maori people in Aotearoa (New Zealand). These are the peoples who have, before us, made Native Language Nests, and so we are not isolated from the global community but instead a very real part of it. It makes this legislation good foreign policy as well.

Financial Need at Washiw Wagayay Mangal

At our school we volunteered at first in our program, and although committed volunteers can do a lot, a school needs financial resources and facilities. The Washoe Tribe provides facility space, administrative support, and such funding as the Tribe could afford on a very limited budget. Beyond the Tribe, the school has been able to secure periodic funding from private foundations, and just this year, we received some federal assistance through a discretionary grant from the Administration for Native Americans. But every year it is a straggle to find funding for our school. Were we to send our children to the surrounding community public schools they would spend some \$5,000 a year to educate our children, but we choose to keep them at home in our community to study in their ancestral language. This is a point we will come back to many times, but it is an important one. This is our conscious choice.

What will this legislation mean to us? These funds will enable us to provide our children with the highest quality education, strengthen indigenous languages, and will strengthen traditional indigenous cultures. It will mean access to cutting-edge immersion teacher training and it will strengthen our teachers. Our children will have better facilities, better nutrition and better teachers and they will continue to grow stronger for the future.

Washiw strength has also always been a cultural value here, and we look forward to the day when we no longer have to take time away from making our programs better and stronger to worry about having the resources to continue operating them.

This is our opportunity to preserve and protect the diversity of Indigenous People's who are speaking and teaching by speaking their ancestral languages. To us, our Elders are national treasures, as is their knowledge. And every day that we return Elders to the earth, we lose one of these treasures and all that they harbor.

As leaders of this great country, we feel you have a duty to the American people to protect this diversity. One of the most dramatic reasons is the way languages differently mirror our understanding of the world we live in. The importance of speaking more than one language is not always clear to those who speak only one--they are threatened by hearing a language they do not understand. There are scholars who feel the same way that we do: that speaking more than one language is truly good for fostering understanding between peoples. This scholar teaches at San

Francisco State University and is newly studying the Italian language:

Old World-cultured Europeans and the upheaved millions who have migrated in the last half century represent opposite means, but the end is the same---they move among languages--while most of us who were culturally isolated on the great land-mass of North America speak English at best. Already, we are a growing minority. Generations hence, our descendants will say to their children, "Once there were people who spoke only one language" and the children will be amazed. But I have become determined to survive with the fittest.¹⁰

Americanized is a relatively new word that describes the homogeneity of the dominant culture. We offer, as Native People, rich and complex traditions and languages that can only make this country richer.

The current state of Native American cultures and languages is not the incidental result of "modernization" or "westward expansion". It was the direct and intentional policy of the US to destroy Indian tribes and Indian cultures. This policy was expressed in acts of war, in acts of cultural genocide, in government child removal and institutionalization policies, in termination acts, in intentional failure to provide protection from civilian atrocities. The United States has a moral obligation to help enable Indian tribes to undo this past wrong and to reestablish cultural systems, including traditional education systems. What better measure of the magnificence of this great country than to recognize errant past policies and to create new ones that will enable those harmed to heal?

Proposed Amendments/Changes to S-2688 Amendment 1: Section 111

After careful consideration of the existing and prospective need, we urge that this section be amended to provide a specific level of funding authorization to provide the Administration and the appropriators with a target level of funding.

We have operated Washiw Wagayay Mangal for 3 1/2 years on the heart of volunteers and a shoestring budget cobbled together from a range of sources. The lack of secure funding limits the program and distracts staff and even students who have offered to sell what little they own to raise the funds necessary to keep the school open. Our teachers and children have become tremendous fundraisers, but this should not be their responsibility. It takes away from the time and energy needed to insure that we deliver the best education possible to the children. The 2 million dollars a year currently spent by the United States government through the Administration for Native Americans for indigenous language renewal is not enough and is clearly insufficient for the operation of Language Survival Schools. We are providing a full education for children who do not regularly attend another school, and we should be funded at a level equal to the funds spent on their peers in public schools in the surrounding community.

As one of our friends--Steven GreyMorning--who founded the Arapaho Language Nests, always says: if the United States government were to spend a fraction of what was spent taking our languages away to renew them we would have no problems finding funds to do this work.

Amendment 2: Amend Section 108 to add the following subsection

"(g) Pilot Native American Language Survival Schools. The Secretary is directed to provide funds through grant or contract, to five pilot Native American Language Survival Schools, which meet the eligibility criteria set forth in this section and have demonstrated success, with priority given to the schools with the greatest financial need and teaching the most endangered languages."

It is important that the funding of actual operating Native American Language Survival schools be made a priority for the Secretary of Education. We want to ensure that if this bill enacted and funded, eligible existing schools will receive the funding necessary to continue their efforts.

Amendment 3: Amend Section 110 to include the establishment of a national clearinghouse of information gathered from the experiences and data generated by Native American Language Survival Schools and Native American Language Nests around the nation.

Amendment 4: Section 4(c)(2)(C) be amended to add the following sentence: "To support research efforts that directly aid in the development of materials used specifically for language dominant site-based educational programs."¹¹

In order for the bill to be useful to languages with "no remaining Native American language speakers", I would recommend defining the research component more specifically. We also respectfully suggest that the research agendas in our communities be set internally by speakers of our respective languages, so that we may do our own research from the inside out in concert with the scholars who have contributed most significantly to our programs.

Recommended Administrative Actions

We have a great need for research to be done to contribute to our programs. We have participated in the regional and national meetings held to fulfill the objectives of the Presidential Executive Order on Indian Education held by the Department of Education in Phoenix last March and later in May in Albuquerque. We opened a dialogue on indigenous immersion language teaching at those meetings, and we know we touched some hearts because many people told us so. In Albuquerque we met with indigenous educators from all over the country, and we were told there is money for research in Indian education set aside. We respectfully suggest that there be an immersion summit where the gains we have made to create this new paradigm in education can be discussed and the research agenda set by the leadership in this movement. If there are strategies that need to be discussed concerning the way the monies that may be allocated for this legislation should be used, we would like to participate in that discussion, and we would like to invite the founders and speakers who work in the Native Language Survival Schools to our homeland where we would be honored to host such a meeting.

We have discussed the need for a Native American Language Education Summit with the Director of the Office of Indian Education, and we strongly urge the Department of Education to use discretionary funds to convene such a summit this fall.

Conclusion It should be reinforced that Native Language Nests and Native Language Survival Schools and the speakers who direct these programs should continue to lead this initiative. If you empower people who are not strong proponents of Native Language Survival Schools to receive this funding, you will again be draining our strength.

This legislation states clearly that Native Americans must make it through the critical start-up period of three years of operation of these schools before they are eligible for this funding. Please do not reduce or change that portion of this legislation.

I would like to close by introducing two Elder Speakers of the Washiw language: Steven James, who is the president of our school board and another board member, Thelma Tripp. Both of these Elders, whom earlier I referred to as national treasures, work at Washiw Wagayay Mangal as teachers. Both are sacrificing their retirements to do so. I am honored to present them to you today, and they will be speaking of a trip made over 100 years ago to Washington DC to ask the federal government for a school of our own. I have attached the transcription from the videotaped interview where we learned of that story to this testimony.

Steven James will speak Washiw, and Thelma will translate for you. We have planned for him to retell the story of our leaders travelling to Washington DC sometime in the 1880's when the Washishiw first asked the federal government for help building a school, and then to tell you of the success of his peers at Stewart Indian Boarding School and the way that we would now like to create students who are successful on our terms. Then he will illustrate for you the importance of the language in his own life during his service to this country during the Korean war. Finally he will say a prayer for all of us and for this great land.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to all of you.

"You must learn the White man language to survive in this world.. But you must learn your own language to survive forever. " --Gladys O'Neill, Ajuma'wi, Achuraa'wi

FOOTNOTES:

1 Jacobsen, William H. Handbook of the North American Indians: Vol. 11 Great Basin; "Washoe Language" Smithsonian Institution, Washington 1986

2 D'Azevedo, Warren L. Handbook of the North American Indians: Vol. 11 Great Basin; "Washoe" Smithsonian Institution Washington 1986

3 Mabel James, Washoe Elder, personal communication 1993. She once said that the Indians had had the "Indian educated out of them". When we asked her later about this, she said, "Yeah! At Stewart (Indian Boarding School)".

4 Of course there are exceptions to this, and some children do exceptionally well in the surrounding community public schools as well as in college.

5 T.L. McCarty et al "Classroom Inquiry and Navajo Learning Styles: A Call for Reassessment; Mehan, Hugh "What Time Is It, Denise?": Asking Known Information Questions in Classroom Discourse"; Diaz, Stephen et al "Sociocultural Resources in Institution: A Context-Specific Approach"

6 Washiw 'itlu Gawgayay Mission Statement, December 14, 1994

7 Lein, 1999

8 Mr. Henry, Auburn Elementary School teacher, personal communication 1999

9 Their teaching responsibilities extend not only to children but also to adults to whom knowledge is continuously passed down.

10 Frances Mayes, Bella Tuscany, Broadway Books 1999

11 Daryl Baldwin, Miami speaker and Native scholar, personal communication 2000