



**TESTIMONY OF
KA'ĪULANI J. K. N. LAEHĀ
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF THE 'AHA PŪNANA LEO, INC.
BEFORE THE U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
MAY 26, 2021**

Relating to S.989, the Native American Language Resource Center Act of 2021, and S.1402, the Durbin Feeling Native American Languages Act of 2021, and “Examining the COVID-19 Response in Native Communities: Native Languages One Year Later”

Aloha Committee Chair Schatz, Vice Chair Murkowski and members of the committee. Mahalo nui, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the 'Aha Pūnana Leo on S.989, a bill to establish a Native American Language Resource Center and S.1402, Durbin Feeling, a bill to amend the Native American Languages Act to ensure the survival and continuing vitality of Native American Languages.

I am Ka'īulani Laehā, the Chief Executive Officer of the 'Aha Pūnana Leo, a 501(c)(3) tax exempt organization dedicated to the revitalization of the Hawaiian language and the longest standing indigenous language medium language nest program in the United States. E ola ka 'ōlelo Hawai'i, the Hawaiian language shall live is the vision that drives our work.

Over the last 4 decades, the tireless efforts of advocates and educators has led to a resurgence of 'Ōlelo Hawai'i, the Native Hawaiian language. It has also allowed us the opportunity to encounter and overcome challenges that other native language communities will face along the long journey of language revitalization. I believe that both S.989 and S.1402 are crucial steps and vital to the progress of Native American language normalization.

S.1402 requires more effective coordination between federal entities that will minimize the current interdepartmental disconnect and lack of understanding of what is needed in the communities doing the work. This bill requires increased reporting to understand areas of importance to support our efforts and will better evidence and communicate the progress or shortcomings of the programs in place.

S. 989 the establishment of a Native American Language Resource Center would significantly bolster our efforts by encouraging Native American languages as medium of instruction, stimulating broader adoption of Native American languages across our national education system, and improving educator support for Native American language instruction. We have been working with Senator Schatz and seeking the establishment of a center like this for many years.

Foreign language centers were established in 1990 under the US Department of Education to provide equitable resources to foreign language communities; Native American language communities, among the most endangered of world languages and from communities that are in need of the support, have yet to see this sort of benefit. In regard to Native American languages, there is little understanding of the range of needs in teaching and learning. While

being able to fulfill high school or college level general education language requirements with a Native American language is a major step in the right direction, further opportunities to support the learning of Native American languages are needed for revitalization efforts to continue and reach their full potential. The Native American Language Resource Center is overdue for our Native American languages and is needed to bring about equitable outcomes today and in the future.

On October 30, 2020, together with the National Coalition of Native American Language Schools and Program, the 'Aha Pūnana Leo held a 30th anniversary virtual celebration on the passage of the Native American Languages Act (NALA). It was a celebration indeed, however, the goals of NALA will only be possible if the Congress mandates specific policies and efforts to ensure effective implementation and enforcement of NALA. S. 989, the Native Language Resource Center Act will provide a national center, accessible to all, and valuable to Native American language programs and schools at all levels. The importance of the establishment of a Native American Language Resource center could not come at a more crucial time, first, with Native American schools and programs being so heavily impacted by Covid-19, and as our Native communities have lost many family members, elders, traditional leaders and some of the only remaining speakers of their Native American language. And second, as President Biden announces the American Families Plan to include support for universal preschool, the Congress must understand the distinct needs of Native communities with early childhood programs taught in the medium of a Native language. The federal agencies that have jurisdiction over implementation of programs like preschools must eliminate barriers Native American language communities face and support administrative rules that are aligned to NALA. I note in particular that Hawai'i state law in alignment with NALA Section 104 (2) is what has allowed our Hawaiian language nest preschools to develop to our current level of national leadership using staff whose qualifications other than those involving health and safety and proficiency in our Indigenous language are left to us based on our own understandings of best practice from our own cultural understandings. Early Childhood Development through a Native American language requires the highest fluency for teachers to transmit the language to the children. Quality programming in a Native American language ensures a safe and healthy robust Native American language environment based in the traditions of the languages and peoples themselves. These are the standards for such quality programming and it is the responsibility of those providing the language nest environment to ensure the success of its program. A Native American Language Resource Center is needed to support school and community based Native American language revitalization efforts across the nation.

Historically, the 'Aha Pūnana Leo has worked with an informal network of similar grassroots organizations with limited resources across the nation. Because of our long history we have come upon many challenges that we have overcome or are working through to ensure a living Hawaiian language and with a Center we can better support other educational institutions, media groups, and small businesses focused on language revitalization by addressing and sharing about our experiences. The Center would be a place of accessible resources for all Native American language communities no matter where they are located and no matter what stage they are at in their language revitalization efforts.

The Native American Language Resource center is an opportunity to formally develop consortia with our American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian serving institutions that are working and supporting school and community-based revitalization efforts. There are a range of needs for Native American language communities that have not been met. As an example, in a typical year we host over a hundred visitors seeking support, assistance, and guidance on

establishing flourishing Native American language programs. A resource center could provide a coordinated support center to help develop programs based on best practices that will align with the needs of each Native American language community. Another example is the shortage of researchers that force small grassroots organizations to rely upon their own teachers to develop learning resources, create appropriate methodology and advocate for themselves. The Native American Language Resource Center would allow for shared research and collaboration to support the development of the teacher workforce and learning methodology and also help to ensure that federal plans, such as the American Families Plan that currently suggests universal preschool for all 3 and 4-year-olds, protects and aligns with our current objectives and does not cause unintended consequences for our Native languages. We know that Native American language programs cannot succeed in a one-size-fits-all type of system.

The key findings in America's Languages Investing in Language Education for the 21st Century report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Commission on Language Learning are:

- “the ability to understand, speak, read, and write in world languages in addition to English is critical to success in business, research, and international relations in the 21st century.”
- “the study of a second language has been linked to improved learning outcomes in other subjects, enhanced cognitive ability, and the development of empathy and effective interpretive skills.”
- “the use of a second language has been linked to a delay in certain manifestations of aging.”

The 'Aha Pūnana Leo has witnessed these outcomes in our graduates that have completed the Hawaiian medium pathway of education that is focused first on exclusive use of Hawaiian language in the early years and subsequent transferred skills to English graduating high school fully bilingual in Hawaiian and English. These findings are very positive in support of language learning however for our American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian languages the additional and most critical benefits are in the relationships of language to spirituality, genealogy, culture and identity. These are described in Kumu Honua Mauli Ola or a Native Hawaiian educational philosophy similar to other Native American language communities' ways of knowing and well-being. The Commission on Language Learning recognized Native American languages as distinct in political status and history and recommended targeted and increased support where our languages are being used as primary languages of education and for the development of curricula and education materials. The Native American Resource Center directly addresses the recommendation of the Commission and could further support our Native language learners in developing high fluency in English or other languages.

As we examine our COVID-19 Response a year later, the pandemic has brought to light the inequities that exist in Native American language support; the lack of learning resources available to families digitally or for home use, access to in person care programs for our children, and the need to increase staff with high levels of fluency that are needed to meet the standard of care to maintain healthy and safe settings in our childcare centers. The 'Aha Pūnana Leo operates language nests on five major islands, Hawai'i, Maui, Moloka'i, O'ahu and Kaua'i. Our graduates (and families) matriculate to Hawai'i's public Hawaiian language medium Charter and Department of Education schools. The 'Aha Pūnana Leo together with our consortium partners, Ke Kula 'o Nāwahīokalani'ōpu'u (Nāwahī) and Ka Haka 'Ula o Ke'elikōlani,

Hawaiian language college, P-20 model demonstrates successful private-public partnership and best practices in language revitalization.

We have witnessed many positive outcomes including our graduates raising their own children in Hawaiian language, the key findings described in the 2017 Commission on Language Learning report and the exciting recent United Nations declaration of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032. Our Native American language organizations need and deserve the full support of a Language Resource Center included in the American Families Plan to ensure that our programs have support that is aligned with the real needs of the communities we serve.

Mahalo nui for this opportunity to provide testimony. I am happy to answer any additional questions you may have. Mahalo nui.

'Aha Pūnana Leo, Inc.
96 Pu'uhonu Place
Hilo, Hawai'i 96720
ahapunanaleo.org