

United States Senate
Committee on Indian Affairs
Oversight Hearing
Native American Education:
Examining Federal Programs
at the
US Department of Education

Written Testimony of
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Chair Murkowski, Vice Chair Schatz, and honorable members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. May I first thank the Committee for holding this critical hearing to hear directly from those who know first-hand the importance of the Department of Education for Native education and all students alike. May I also respectfully acknowledge Alaska's Senator, Lisa Murkowski, whom we recognize and honor as Aanshawát'í, Lady of the Land, of the Deisheetaan clan of Angoon.

My name is Rosita Worl. My Tlingit name is Yeidiklas'akw and my ceremonial name is Ƙaaháni. I am Eagle from the Shangukeidí or the Thunderbird clan and I am from the Kawdliyaayi Hít or the House Lowered from the Sun in Klukwan in the Chilkat Region. I am also a Child of the Lukaax̄.ádi or Sockeye clan. I serve as the president of the Sealaska Heritage Institute (SHI), which is an affiliate of Sealaska Corporation. Sealaska was created under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 to settle our aboriginal land claims.

Founded in 1980, SHI's mission is "to perpetuate and enhance Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultures of Southeast Alaska" and its goal is "to promote cross-cultural understanding." Our early historical leaders and grandparents had come to realize that quality and equitable education for all students and the integration of Native culture into schools were critical to the survival of Alaska Native cultures. Our evaluations and assessments have consistently revealed that integration of our federally funded cultural, language, and arts programs into educational institutions leads to greater academic achievement and school retention among Alaska Native students.

We have been fortunate in establishing relationships with Native entities throughout the State of Alaska and with Native Hawaiian entities that implement Native education programs funded by the Department of Education (DOE) grants that are available to Native organizations and tribes such as Demonstration Grants for Indian Children and the Alaska Native Education Program. We have discussed with them the challenges of Indigenous education and the persistent lack of funding.

The fiscal crisis that the State of Alaska has been experiencing has translated into minimal funding for Native education, making federal education funding even more important. Despite these challenges, we can confidently state that through our culture-based programs that we have integrated into schools with funding from the DOE, we have witnessed measurable educational achievements among Alaska Native students as well improvements in their social and emotional wellbeing.

I would like to add that the benefits of Native education programming are widespread, with non-Native students learning about our cultures and history, which has led to improved cross-cultural relationships. Coincident with these benefits, Alaskans have come to appreciate the value and richness of our region's cultural diversity, a change from earlier periods in which suppression of Native cultures was the norm.

Through our discussions and relationships with Native Hawaiians, I have found that we share similar priorities, programming, and demonstrated benefits regarding DOE support and funding, with a common theme: that culture-based educational programming supports educational

achievement. Like Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians share a priority in obtaining DOE support and grants to develop culturally appropriate programs that address:

- beginning reading and literacy among students in kindergarten through third grade;
- the needs of at-risk children and youth including early learning and school readiness;
- the needs in fields or disciplines in which Native Hawaiians are underemployed; and, of course,
- the use of the Hawaiian language in instruction.

In 2022, I had the opportunity to testify and submit written testimony to Senator Murkowski’s field hearing on “Transformative and Innovative Strategies for Better Educational Outcomes for Alaska Native Students” in Anchorage, Alaska.¹ The successes I outlined in my testimony resulted largely from the support of the DOE and direct federal funding to Alaska Native entities. I would like to briefly review the findings I shared then as they are directly interlinked with support and funding from the DOE and demonstrate the importance of the department. Based on our discussions and relationships with other Alaska Native entities, I suggest that these findings are applicable to other Native entities throughout the state receiving federal dollars. I also note that the grants awarded to SHI were shared with school districts, the state university system, other educational institutions, and tribes to enhance Native education.

An over-arching statewide strategic approach has been to integrate Native culture into educational systems targeting Native students, but not to the exclusion of non-Native students. To accomplish this objective, we developed programs to educate teachers and administrators, the majority of whom are non-Native, about Native cultures and to enhance their abilities to support Native culture instruction. We also supported art, language, and teacher training programs at the University of Alaska Southeast, again with the support of the DOE and federal grants that SHI received.

Another strategic approach was the development of formal partnerships with school districts and educational organizations with the ultimate objective of promoting systemic institutional changes that support Native education. These partnerships were also a means of maximizing our resources and infusing funds into financially stressed educational systems. A recent study by The Foraker Group reported that in 2022 SHI, with \$19.8 million in revenues, was the sixth largest public foundation in Alaska in providing funding totaling \$3.5 million to other entities.² This does not include the 200 contractors SHI retains annually to support its programming throughout the region and state.

Finally, to ensure that our approach was successful, we continually evaluated our programs to determine if we were meeting our goals of promoting academic success and school retention as well as imparting Native cultural knowledge.

¹ February 24, 2022. Worl, Rosita Kaahani, Ph.D., Sealaska Heritage Institute. Written testimony submitted to Senator Murkowski’s field hearing, “Transformative and Innovative Strategies for Better Educational Outcomes for Alaska Native Students.” Anchorage, Alaska.

² 2024. The Foraker Group. “Alaska’s Nonprofit Sector: Generating Economic Impact.” Anchorage, Alaska.

With these strategic approaches that were supported by DOE and grant funding, Alaska Natives had a direct role in promoting systemic changes with the integration of Native culture instruction into educational systems. The data we collected demonstrates academic progress—academic progress that had largely been absent until this period when Native entities began to receive education grants to develop and implement culture-based programming in schools.

In my 2022 testimony, I highlighted several of our transformative and innovative programs that had proven to be successful in promoting the academic success of Native students. I have attached that reference as Appendix A of this document for your review.

I also identified key components that led to success as a result of the DOE’s support and funding that I would now like to share with the Committee:

Key Components of Native Educational Success

1. DOE’s support and federal funding were key in supporting Native entities’ direct involvement in their children’s education and to actively engage with the administrations of school districts and school boards to promote and develop relevant educational programs for Native students.
2. DOE’s support and federal funding allowed Native entities to develop culture-based programs. One notable example is SHI’s Baby Raven Reads program, designed to support early childhood literacy and to engage parents in their children’s education. This latter point is an especially important development. I am sure that you are aware that generations of Native children were institutionalized in boarding schools. They did not have the benefit of learning the value and practices of parental involvement in their children’s education. The involvement of parents in Baby Raven Reads activities led to phenomenal increases in childhood literacy (see Appendix A for more information on this program).
3. DOE’s support and federal funding supported cultural orientations and instruction for non-Native teachers that they could then teach to their students. SHI’s funding also allowed us to support Native teacher recruitment, training, and retention in the University of Alaska system through scholarships, apprenticeships, and internships.
4. DOE’s support and federal funding allowed Native entities to develop curriculum and educational materials that embody and reflect Native cultures, values, and worldviews.
5. DOE’s support and federal funding allowed Native entities to establish partnerships and to infuse funds into partner school districts and the University of Alaska Southeast to support Native education, which ultimately promoted policy and systemic changes. Today, SHI has partnerships with 15 school districts and two educational organizations in Southeast Alaska.³ SHI also maintains partnerships with the Bristol Bay Foundation and the Arctic Slope Community Foundation (ASCF), which are also supported by federal educational funding and play a crucial role in supporting education and cultural preservation in their regions and throughout the State of Alaska. For example, the ASCF relies on ANEP funding, which

³ Chatham School District, Craig City School District, Haines Borough School District, Hoonah City School District, Hydaburg City School District, Juneau School District, Kake City School District, Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District, Klawock City School District, Mt. Edgecumbe (independent from Sitka SD), Petersburg School District, Sitka School District, Wrangell Public Schools, Yakutat School District, the Alaska Association of School Boards, and the Southeast Regional Resource Center.

enables them to provide essential financial resources that support initiatives across 26 rural communities, including language revitalization, locally responsive curriculum development, and academic enrichment programs.

Overall, DOE support and federal funding have supported transformative and innovative Native educational programming that promotes Native academic achievement throughout the State of Alaska.

All that said, I must also add that while we have made significant progress, Native student scores continue to trail behind reported averages for all students, especially after kindergarten, demonstrating that the need persists for continued Native educational funding.⁴

Furthermore, I must also emphasize that the impacts of COVID-19, including the closure of schools, social isolation, and lack of access to computers to participate in virtual programming, exacerbated the problems faced by Native students across the state. Reports from schools indicate that the academic gains that we had made have since been eroded. Additionally, these reports reveal an increase of self-harm. While an infusion of federal funds had been made available to address the COVID-19 impacts, I am concerned that the effects will be long term and far outlast this limited cash infusion.

One of the primary DOE funding sources that I would like to highlight is the Alaska Native Education Program (ANEP). The late Senator Ted Stevens originally authored the Alaska Native Education Equity, Support, and Assistance Act in the 1990s to create equity in education for Alaska Natives after the Bureau of Indian Affairs schools closed in Alaska. Initially, ANEP funding was available to school districts, educational organizations, the state's university system, and Alaska Native entities. Under these regulations, Native entities received only a fraction of allotted funds.

In 2016, as a result of an Alaska Federation of Natives resolution, the regulations were changed to limit ANEP grant eligibility to Native entities. From this period, we began to see improvements in Native academic achievement with the direct engagement of Native entities across the state in education. This is exemplified in part by the graduation rate for Native students participating in ANEP-funded programs, such as those administered by Cook Inlet Tribal Council and SHI, which are consistently in the 90% range over the past decade. This progress is the result of intentional effective programming for students in kindergarten through grade 12, targeting each developmental level with the necessary supports that lead to academic success.

The academic success fostered among Native students that I have outlined can largely be attributed to ANEP funding. ANEP grantees have successfully intervened on behalf of Native students and families to contribute to their success both academically and socially. However, we are aware that the level of ANEP funding is not sufficient to allow more Native entities to participate in ANEP.

⁴ National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data for Alaska students, <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile/overview/AK>

SHI has continually advocated for increased ANEP funding to support the inclusion of additional grantees because of the known educational benefits ANEP-funded programs provide. Additionally, SHI will provide grant writing training to other Native entities on May 5–9. We have found that a minimal number of Native entities participate in federal program-sponsored grant writing training. Since we partner with and extend our grant funds to other Native entities and have relationships with multiple Native organizations and tribes outside of Southeast Alaska, we believe that an increased number of Native entities would participate in our grant writing training that could potentially lead to ANEP grant awards. Because of its significant impact in Alaska, SHI has recommended an increase in the 2026 ANEP appropriation to \$70 million from its 2025 appropriation of \$44.953 million.

I would like to conclude with the recognition of the Department of Education and its staff, who have proven to be invaluable in not only administering grant funds, but in responding to the multiple and ongoing questions we have posed about educational programming. They have sponsored invaluable grant project directors' meetings in which directors share lessons learned and information about approaches and techniques that have proven to be successful. The dedicated DOE staff share with grantees recent academic studies related to our programs that highlight important lessons for academic and social success. They also support and advance our recommendations to the Secretary of Education and ultimately to Congress that we believe will lead to improvements in Native education.

I would like to extend my thanks to the Department of Education for their support and to Congress for enacting laws and providing funding to support quality education for Natives and students across the country.

We believe that the educational success of students in our communities, state, and country can support enhanced quality of life for individuals and healthy and self-sustaining societies. With adequate funding, students and educators across Alaska have access to quality education and tools that reflect their heritage while equipping them with the skills necessary for future success.

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Appendix A

Tlingit Culture, Language, and Literacy Program

In 2000, SHI founded the Tlingit Culture, Language, and Literacy (TCLL) program in the Juneau School District to increase the academic performance of Native students in kindergarten through fifth grade. A 2013 longitudinal study found that over a ten-year span, TCLL students generally did as well as or better than their non-Native peers on standardized tests in reading and writing. It also showed that 60% of the first cohort of TCLL students graduated from high school, compared to the overall Alaska Native graduation rate in Juneau, then 47%.⁵

By 2011, the program was operating with its own curriculum that integrated Tlingit cultural history, arts, and oral narratives with the district's curriculum. However, from 2012 to 2018, the district adopted Alaska's new content standards for English language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science and the TCLL program had to set aside its own curriculum—though it continued to provide students with 30 minutes of Tlingit language instruction, four days a week.

In 2017, the district asked the TCLL teachers to create a culturally rich curriculum based on the district's adoption of Alaska's new content standards. A three-year grant (2018–2021) awarded to SHI by the US Department of Education allowed TCLL's teachers, fluent Tlingit speakers, advanced second language speakers, and Tlingit linguists to complete the first of two phases needed for TCLL to operate as a dual-language program. During this phase, the TCLL program:

- Hired three Tlingit language teachers, adopted a co-teaching model, and provided content-based instruction (with Tlingit as the medium of instruction) for its Native students.
- Revised its Tlingit Language Proficiency Scope and Sequence (based on the Northwest Indian Language Institute's Language Proficiency Benchmarks) in order to implement leveled student assessments.
- Developed a new TCLL program curriculum aligned with the Alaska content standards for K–5 English language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science.

On average, 65% of the TCLL program's students were economically disadvantaged at the start of the federally funded project, a significantly higher rate than for the Juneau School District as a whole (30%). Research shows that challenges related to economic conditions in the home can delay children's development of the oral language skills, vocabulary, and emergent literacy skills necessary for reading⁶ and the number competencies necessary for mathematics.⁷

The federal funding SHI received for the TCLL program also supported Tlingit language revitalization by promoting the use of the language in students' homes. At a meeting during this

⁵ Figures in this section come from the 2013 report published by Sealaska Heritage Institute, "Ten Years Later: A History of the Tlingit Culture, Language, and Literacy Program in the Juneau School District."

⁶ Hoff, E. (2013). "Interpreting the early language trajectories of children from low-SES and language minority homes: Implications for closing achievement gaps." *Developmental Psychology*, 49(1), 4–14.

⁷ Jordan, N. C., & Levine, S. C. (2009). "Socioeconomic variation, number competence, and mathematics learning difficulties in young children." *Developmental Disabilities Research Reviews*, 15(1), 60–68.

phase of the project, a parent of a TCLL student explained: “Learning our language gives us connection to our ancestors, brings healing to our soul, and brings us into our future ... I tell my son we are blessed to be able to learn our language because people tried to take it from us.”

A comparison of TCLL students’ Measure of Annual Progress (MAP) scores prior to SHI’s use of federal funding to enhance programing for TCLL students to their MAP scores at the end of the first year of the grant demonstrate the efficacy of SHI’s use of federal funding.⁸ In one year, the percentage of TCLL students proficient in reading increased by 17 points and the percentage of TCLL students proficient in mathematics increased by 12 points.

For further comparison, the percentage of change for the other students served by the same elementary school where the TCLL program operates as a “school within a school” demonstrated an increase in reading proficiency of 6 percentage points and a decrease in math proficiency of 1 point over the same time-period and based on those students’ MAP scores. SHI is now applying for funding from the US Department of Education to support the second phase needed for TCLL to operate as a dual-language program.

Baby Raven Reads Program

Since 2014, Sealaska Heritage has sponsored Baby Raven Reads (BRR), a nationally recognized, award-winning program that improves early literacy skills by translating cultural strengths into home literacy practices. Alaska Native families with children up to age 5 receive books published through the program and attend family literacy events that are rooted in culture, community, and place. The pilot project began in Juneau in 2014. Initial feedback was astounding. Through a partnership with Tlingit & Haida Head Start, the program now serves 16 communities in Southeast Alaska, providing meaningful family engagement opportunities and professional development for early childhood educators throughout the region.

Through BRR, the number of Alaska Native students consistently demonstrating phonetic awareness increased by 20 percentage points from 2014–2020. During this time, the proportion of non-Alaska Native students consistently demonstrating phonetic knowledge decreased by 5 percentage points.

BRR was recognized in 2017 by the Library of Congress, which gave SHI its Best Practice Honoree award, making it one of only 15 programs in the world to receive the award that year. SHI has received several awards for the incredible book series published through Baby Raven Reads. *Shanyaak’utlaax: Salmon Boy* won the 2018 American Indian Youth Literature Best Picture Book award from the American Indian Library Association (AILA) and *Raven Makes the Aleutians* and *Celebration* received AILA Picture Book Honor awards in 2020 and 2024, respectively. *How Devil’s Club Came to Be* was recommended by American Indians in Children’s Literature (AICL) and film producers have expressed interest in producing an animated film based on the book. The board books *Cradle Songs of Southeast Alaska* and *Wilgyigyet: Learn the Colors in Sm’algyax* were also AICL-recommended titles.

⁸ Note that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Juneau School District was unable to conduct MAP testing for all of its elementary school students in 2020 and 2021.

One parent shared, “I cried tears of happiness and sorrow when we received [the 2018 Raven series] in the mail because I thought of how amazing it was that my children will forever have something so powerful in their lives that I didn’t have and how my grandmother and those others that came before me suffered and fought so hard for us to be where we are today as Indigenous Peoples.”⁹

Program evaluations reveal that the elements contributing to the success of BRR are as follows:

1. Federal funding to support BRR programs
 - ANEP, STEPS, and ANA have contributed a combined total of just over \$6.5 million since 2014.
2. Direct involvement of Native entities in BRR programming
 - Tlingit & Haida Head Start centers in 10 Southeast Alaska communities: Angoon, Craig, Hoonah, Juneau, Klawock, Petersburg, Saxman, Sitka, Wrangell, and Yakutat.
 - Five Southeast Alaska tribal entities: Yakutat Tlingit Tribe, Organized Village of Kake, Metlakatla Indian Community, Chilkat Indian Association, and Ketchikan Indian Community.
 - Language immersion involvement in two schools: Haa Yoo X’atangi Kúdi Tlingit language nest in Juneau and Xántsii Náay Haida Immersion Preschool in Hydaburg.
3. Involvement of Native parents in BRR programs including reading to and with Native students
 - Current enrollment is near 500 families, serving more than 766 children.
4. Children’s books based on Native culture and oral traditions, written by Native authors and illustrated by Native artists
 - 30 publications have been produced since 2016 with Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultural themes.

SHI is ecstatic about the success of the Baby Raven Reads program and believes it should be replicated statewide if not nationwide.

Thru the Cultural Lens

SHI is completing the ninth year of Thru the Cultural Lens (TCL), a cultural responsiveness training program for educators. The core of the program is a 50-hour professional development seminar for educators designed to enhance participants’ understanding of Alaska Native cultures, provide strategies and resources for developing culturally responsive classrooms, and foster a

⁹ Parent feedback from a Baby Raven Reads Parent-Child Project Assessment.

sense of community among those dedicated to providing more place-based and culturally relevant school experiences. Four seminars are offered annually, with two hybrid cohorts in Juneau (fall and spring), and two virtual cohorts for southern Southeast communities including Hyaburg, Ketchikan, Metlakatla, Petersburg, and Wrangell (fall and spring). Participants receive a stipend and three credits for successful program completion.

To support the growing community of educators working to become more culturally responsive practitioners, TCL hosts an annual region-wide education conference. In this third three-year grant cycle, TCL is on track to meet its targets including expanding to southern Southeast Alaska, serving 120 educators through the in-depth seminar, and reaching 600 participants through the annual culturally responsive education conference.

Seminar participants say the experience is transformative, providing inspiration, confidence, and vital new connections to colleagues, Alaska Native Elders and scholars, and resources. Further, they report that they feel confident integrating what they have learned into their teaching practice and say the program helps them create a better learning environment for all students. Many describe it as life changing, as demonstrated by this sampling of participants' post-seminar comments:

- “I think I cried at every class. What some of these teachers have done in their classroom was just mind blowing. It just made me want to be a better teacher. It was very empowering.”
- “I think this is a thing every educator in Alaska should do. I think this should be taught to students in college. I think this should be part of the required course for new teachers to the state.”
- “The content was unmatched. And being Alaska Native and being in the culture, that’s something to say for Sealaska. You don’t find that kind of content anywhere, and the way they lined up the speakers was incredible.”
- “I feel like my heart was opened in a lot of ways. It was not textbook learning. It was actual personal stories and people who were passionate about what they talked about. It changed some of my views.”
- “I feel so much more educated as a person in general.”
- “I’ve been teaching for 28 years, and there were things I’ve never heard before—methodologies and pedagogies. I grew so much as a teacher.”

Traditional Native Games

While not viewed strictly as an academic program nor accepted by schools as an official school sport, the participation of Native students in traditional Native games has had a significant beneficial impact on Native students. As one Juneau school board member commented, it is the only program that is benefiting a population who she identified as “at-risk” Native students.

First, we want to recognize Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), long-time host of NYO Games, for its 2016 evaluation report¹⁰ that prompted SHI to integrate Native games into Southeast Alaska schools.

The Traditional Games of the Native Youth Olympics (NYO) includes multiple events and competitions. They are based on traditional forms of training used to build the strength, agility, and endurance necessary for hunting and survival. These games have been practiced by Indigenous people in Alaska and across the Arctic, going back hundreds of years. The Games include events such as the Seal Hop, which is a traditional hunting technique meant to mimic seal movements; the Scissor Broad Jump, Kneel Jump, One-Hand Reach, and the Alaskan High Kick to test agility; and the Wrist Carry, Dene Stick Pull, and Inuit Stick Pull to test strength. The Games are open to Native and non-Native students.

The start of the current NYO program for middle and high school students in Southeast Alaska has been the work of coach Kyle Worl, who is now a staff person with the Central Council of Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska (T&H). He was successful in establishing partnerships with SHI, T&H, Goldbelt Heritage Foundation, and the University of Alaska Southeast to expand the sport across the region and to host the annual regional competition in Juneau.

NYO has had a quantifiable positive impact on Alaskan youth, reaching 2,032 individual participants in the Juneau Traditional Games in 2019 alone. Surveys from that event and CITC's 2016 report show promising results for positive impacts on Alaskan youth. Notable highlights include:

- Improved academic performance
 - 74% of surveyed student athletes improved or maintained good grades in order to continue participation in NYO Games (CITC, 2016)
- Reduced truancy
 - 77% of surveyed student athletes credited NYO as an incentive to stay in school (CITC, 2016)
 - When surveyed again in 2019, 89% of athletes responded that NYO/Traditional Games made them want to stay in school (SHI, 2019)
- Improved physical and mental health and wellbeing
 - 66% of surveyed student athletes indicated improved self-confidence (CITC, 2016)
 - When asked “How has your health changed through participation in NYO Games?” at the 2019 Traditional Games in Juneau, 27% of participants reported improved general health and 13% of participants reported a better sense of wellbeing (SHI, 2019)

¹⁰ 2016. “Native Youth Olympics Celebrates Community and Culture,” CIRI Foundation.

- 97% of athletes reported an increase in “hard work” (SHI, 2019)
- 95% reported an increase in “self-confidence” (SHI, 2019)
- 87% reported an increase in “self-esteem” (SHI, 2019)

Both reports on NYO from 2019 and 2016 show promising trends in academic performance and involvement and the wellbeing of the athletes. Additionally, the athletes themselves noted how NYO has personally affected their lives. When interviewed about NYO and participation in school, one 2019 athlete shared the following: “I do NYO because I was alone, I couldn’t find something meaningful. I play so I can feel proud of myself, and get my family back into Native culture, starting with me.”

NYO and Traditional Games influence young people to improve academic performance, strengthen overall health and wellbeing, and instill important tribal values, including leadership and respect—values that make strong communities and build tomorrow’s leaders. Another 2019 athlete voiced these values in their interview, saying “Mind, body, and spirit—the games help with all three of those things.”

While we have managed to piece together funding to support Traditional Games in our schools, the evaluations show that funding for Traditional Games should be implemented as a program widely supported by the federal government.

Native Leadership and Participation in Education

Key to SHI’s and other Native entities’ success has been the leadership and direct participation of Natives in educational systems. The data outlined below clearly shows that Native leadership and participation in schools facilitated Native education success. It was a stark change that transformed educational systems with a record of dismal failure to one that promoted the academic achievement and school retention of Native students.

Native communities and educators alike have long lamented that Native families were not engaged in their children’s education. We believe that federal funding and programs that have been made available to Alaskan tribes and Native entities have facilitated the direct participation of Alaska Natives in educational program development and management.

Federal funding has allowed tribes and Alaska Native entities to become directly engaged in the education of Native children, including the following accomplishments:

- designing culture-based programs and curricula materials and resources;
- advocating for the integration of language and culture into schools;
- training teachers to provide culturally responsive training;
- creating instructional practices in the classroom that engage and connect with Native students;

- collaborating with the University of Alaska to recruit and train Native teachers; and
- identifying key areas where Native students were under-performing, and to then develop culturally responsive programs to address those challenges.

The State of Alaska is responsible for providing education for all of its citizens, but we as Native peoples had to go to court to ensure that the State fulfilled its responsibility and established schools in Native communities. Although we were able to secure schools in our communities, significant disparities between the academic achievement of Alaska Native and non-Native students persisted. It was only when Native entities became directly involved in Native education that we began to see improvement in achievement scores and graduation rates and reduction in dropout rates.

To support this assertion, I would like to highlight a few data elements from the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development that reflect improvements in Native education:

The high school graduation tests in reading and math from 2003 and 2014 show that Native students doubled the increase in reading scores in contrast to non-Native students. In math for the same years, Native students had an increase of near 5% more non-Native students.

Pass Rates for Alaska High School Graduation Tests, 2003 vs. 2014			
	2003 Reading	2014 Reading	Increase
White	81.5%	92%	10.5%
Native	44.6%	66.8%	22.2%
	2003 Math	2014 Math	Increase
White	79%	85.1%	6.1%
Native	50.1%	60.7%	10.6%

In terms of statewide graduation rates, we saw substantial improvement in the graduation rates of Alaska Natives, which went from 49% in 2000 to 69% in 2017—an increase of 20 points.

Alaska High School Graduation Rates, 2000, 2010, 2017				
	2000	2010	2017	Increase
All students	61%	68%	78.2%	17.2%
White students	65%	75.2%	82.2%	16.8%
Native students	49%	50.7%	69%	20%

While Native student scores and graduation rates continue to lag behind non-Native students’, we have narrowed the gap. We believe that federal funding that was made available to Native entities throughout Alaska has contributed to this improvement. With the support of federal grants and the participation of Native entities in education, we are making progress.

We must continue to maximize the leadership and participation of Alaska Natives in the planning and management of Alaska Native education programs that have been made possible by federal funding. This funding has become even more critical as the State of Alaska has continued to reduce educational funding as a result of the fiscal crisis Alaska has experienced in the last several years.

SHI readily concedes that we yet have much work to overcome the serious educational disadvantages Native students face, but through past and ongoing federal grants, we are making progress. Our success in promoting systemic changes in schools has resulted in widespread understanding of the necessity and benefits of integrating Native language and cultures and culture-based programming into our educational system.

We would like to recognize the efforts of the late Congressman Don Young and thank Senators Murkowski and Sullivan for their continued advocacy and support of Alaska Native education. Their work has contributed to the progress we have made in Native academic achievement and school retention.

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