



## **Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children**

### **Education & Early Childhood Development Panel**

**August 20, 2021 1:00 – 2:30 P.M.**

My name is Rosita Kaaháni Worl, and I serve as the President of the Sealaska Heritage Institute (SHI). SHI was created by the Sealaska, which is an Alaska Native Corporation created by Congress under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 (ANCSA), which settled the aboriginal land claims of Alaska Natives. Congress mandated in ANCSA that Alaska Native Corporations are to promote the social and economic welfare of Alaska Natives.

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. To achieve our Mission and goal, SHI works to integrate language and culture into schools. We believe that this approach leads to equitable education and the

educational success of Native students as well as the survival of Alaska Native cultures and the well-being of our students, tribes and communities.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak on the successes, challenges, and opportunities for improvement in education & early childhood development. Of course, we are extremely proud of the name of this Commission honoring two individuals who made significant contributions to their respective tribes and to the country.

May I first say that while we have made significant progress in Native academic achievement and school retention, the status of Native education remains problematic and we still face many challenges.

I must also add that the impacts of COVID-19, the closure of schools, and the social isolation have exacerbated the problems Native students have been facing and more than likely erode the academic gains we have made. While an infusion of federal funds have been made available to address the COVID-19 impacts, I am



concerned that the effects will be long term and far outlast the one-time cash infusion.

I would like to speak to a significant variable that allowed for Alaska Native leadership and direct participation in educational systems that the data clearly shows promoted success in Native education. 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.

I will also briefly review two SHI programs that are proving to be highly successful in my presentation.

### **Native Leadership and Participation in Education**

We believe that federal funding and programming 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*. Natives and educators alike have long lamented that Native families were not engaged in their children's education.



Tribes and Alaska Native entities have received federal funding that has allowed them to become directly engaged in the education of Native children and to them accomplish the following:

- to design culture-based programs and curricula material and resources;

- to advocate for and integrate language and culture into schools;

- to train teachers to provide culturally responsive training;

- to create instructional practices in the classroom that engaged Native students;

- to collaborate with the University of Alaska to recruit and train Native teachers;

- to identify key areas where Native students were under-performing, and then to 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 maintained schools in Native communities. Although we were able to secure schools in our communities, significant disparities continued to



exist between the academic achievement of Alaska Native and non-Native students. It was only when Native entities became directly involved in Native education did we begin to see improvement in achievement scores and graduation rates and decreased dropout rates.

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

The high school graduation tests in reading and math from 2003 to 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% over non-Native students.

**PEAKS Assessment Data- 2017-2019- Statewide 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Students**

	<b>2017 ELA Adv/Proficient</b>	<b>2018 ELA Adv/Proficient</b>	<b>2019 ELA Adv/Proficient</b>	<b>+/- change</b>
<b>Alaska Native/American Indian</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>-1%</b>
<b>Caucasian</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>-1%</b>
	<b>2017 Math Adv/Proficient</b>	<b>2018 Math Adv/Proficient</b>	<b>2019 Math Adv/Proficient</b>	<b>+/- change</b>
<b>Alaska</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>-2%</b>



<b>Native/American Indian</b>				
<b>Caucasian</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>+4%</b>

\*ELA (English Language Arts)

### High School Graduation Tests from 2003 - 2014

	2003 Reading	2014 Reading	Increase
White	81.5%	92%	11%
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 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%.

<b>Graduation Rate:</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>Growth</b>
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 Alaska Native student scores and graduation 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 the State of Alaska has



contributed to this improvement. With the support of federal grants and the participation of Native entities in education, we are making progress.

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

We must continue to maximize the leadership of and participation by Alaska Natives in the planning and management of Alaska Native education program that has 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.



## **Baby Raven Reads Program**

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

Since 2014, Sealaska Heritage has sponsored Baby Raven Reads, 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 and attend family literacy events that are rooted in culture, community, and place. The pilot project began in Juneau in 2014-2017. The feedback was astounding. Through partnership with Tlingit and 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 Baby Raven Reads, the number of Alaska Native students consistently demonstrating phonetic awareness increased by 20% from 2014-2015 to 2019-2020. During this time, the proportion of non-Alaska Native students consistently demonstrating phonetic knowledge decreased by 5%.



Baby Raven Reads was recognized in 2017 by the Library of Congress, which gave SHI its 2017 Best Practice Honoree award, one of only 15 programs in the nation to receive the award. The program has received recognition and several awards for the incredible book series. SHI's Baby Raven book *Shanyaak'utlaax: Salmon Boy* won the 2018 American Indian Youth Literature Best Picture Book Award from the American Indian Library Association. The Baby Raven book *How Devil's Club Came to Be* was recommended by *American Indians in Children's Literature*. Film producers have expressed interest in producing an animated film on this book.

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."* (Parent feedback from a Baby Raven Reads Parent-Child Project Assessment).



The evaluations reveal that the elements contributing to the success of Baby Raven Reads are as follows:

1. Federal funding to support BRR programs.

ANEP, STEPS, ANA - a combined total of just over \$6.5 million dollars since 2014.

2. Direct involvement of Native entities in BRR programming.

Tlingit and Haida Head Start Centers in 10 communities

Angoon, Craig, Hoonah, Juneau, Klawock, Petersburg, Saxman, Sitka, Wrangell, Yakutat

Five Tribal entities including:

Yakutat Tlingit Tribe  
Organized village of Kake  
Metlakatla Indian Community  
Chilkat Indian Association  
Ketchikan Indian Community

3. Language Immersion Involvement in two Schools

Language Nest Haa Yoo X'atángi Kúdi – Juneau  
Xántsii Náay Haida Immersion Preschool – Hydaburg

4. Involvement of Native parents in BRR programs reading to and with Native students.

Current enrollment is near 500 families and served more than 766 children



5. Publications based on Native culture and oral traditions; written by Native authors and graphics by Native artists.

29 publications produced with themes of Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian cultures.

### **Traditional Native Games**

While not viewed strictly as an academic program nor accepted by schools as a 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) for its 2016 evaluation report that prompted SHI to integrate Native games into Southeast Alaska schools.

The Traditional Games of the Native Youth Olympics (NYO) includes different events and competitions. They are based on the training that was necessary for



strength and hunting and survival skills of Indigenous people in Alaska and across the Arctic, going back hundreds of years. Games include such things as the Seal Hop which is a traditional hunting technique meant to mimic seal movements, the Scissor Broad Jump, Kneel Jump, Wrist Carry, several other jumping and kicking events, Dene Stick Pull, Inuit Stick Pull, One Hand Reach and the Alaska High Kick.

The start of the current NYO Program for middle school and high school students in Southeast Alaska has been the work of Kyle Worl. He was successful in establishing partnerships with SHI, Central Council Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, Goldbelt Heritage Institute and the University of Alaska Southeast to expand the sport across the region and the annual regional competition in Juneau.

NYO has had a quantifiable positive impact on Alaskan youths, reaching 2,032 individual participants in the Southeast Traditional Games NYO in 2019 alone.

Surveys from both the 2019 Traditional Games NYO and Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) in 2016 show promising results for positive impacts on Alaskan youth.

Notable highlights include:



- Better 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 the NYO 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 Southeast Traditional Games NYO-
    - 27% of participants reported improved general health
    - 13% of participants reported a better sense of wellbeing
  - 97% of athletes reported an increase in “Hard Work”, 95% reported an increase in “Self-Confidence”, and 87% reported an increase in “Self-esteem” (SHI, 2019)



Both reports on NYO from 2019 and 2016 show promising results in academic performance and involvement and the wellbeing of the athletes. Additionally, the athletes themselves note how NYO has personally affected their lives. When interviewed about NYO and participation in school, one 2019 athlete stated that “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.”

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.



Again, may I thank the Commission for coming to Alaska. We are very excited about the work of the Commission.

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