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NIEA State of Native Education Address

President Robert Cook

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“We will be forever known by the tracks we leave behind”

Hau Mitakuyapi,

My name is Robert Cook, my Lakota name is Wazi Hanska or Tall Pine. My parents are the late Lamont and Edna Janis Cook. I am proud to be an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe. I am married to Daphne Richards. I am proud of Daphne as she serves as the first American Indian ever elected to the Rapid City School Board in South Dakota. We have two sons, Lamont and Caleb, both students in the Rapid City public school district. In my professional career, it has been a great an honor to serve as a high school and middle school teacher for eighteen years. I am humbled to serve as the 40th president of the National Indian Education Association, the nation's oldest and largest native education organization, representing the 562 federally recognized tribes, Alaskan Natives villages and our Native Hawaiian relatives, who are presently engaged in a historic fight to gain federal recognition.

NIEA was founded in 1970 to give our Nations first people a voice in their struggle to improve access to education opportunities. I stand here today on behalf our NIEA Board of Directors, staff and membership to provide to our friends, allies, and those who would stand in the way of our treaty protected right of education equity, NIEA's fourth Annual State of Native Education Address. We would like to take this time to welcome all in attendance here at the National Press Club, located in Washington DC and thank you for attending NIEA's 12th annual Legislative summit.

January 20, 2009 was a historic day in America. An estimated two million Americans gathered in Washington DC, joined by millions of people around the world who watched President Barack Obama, sworn in as our nation's 44th President. President Obama is our country's first African American president, this historic moment came 233 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence that proclaimed, *“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”*

Indian Country was proud to play a part in this historic event though unprecedented voter turn out and strong civic engagement throughout our tribal communities during this historic election. NIEA congratulates President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden and we look forward to the positive change that this administration will bring.

As a history teacher and I would like to put this historic presidential event in perspective. It was only 55 years ago when the US Supreme Court decision called, *Brown vs. Board of Education* struck down the walls of segregation in our public schools, allowing African American's and other minorities the constitutionally protected right to a quality and equitable public school education.

Today our native parents and educators question whether there is true equity in education for our children in our public schools. Statistics show a continuing trend of disproportionate dropout rates, low graduation rates, lower state standardized test scores and higher incidents of referrals to juvenile placement facilities for our Native students. Many of our tribal communities are burdened with high unemployment, high poverty, a lack of infrastructure, and resources. Many of our tribal and impacted schools are in need of immediate new construction, repair and maintenance. High mobility and a lack of collaboration between the intergovernmental agencies place stress on our children who are entitled to a seem less transition for educational success. Often our native students who attend public are often not provided the resources mandated under Title VII of Leave no Child Behind Act.

The United States Constitution is the foundation of our country's government and through the interpretation of the constitution, it provides the premise by which all laws and procedures are based. Article 6 of the United States Constitution states that, ***This Constitution, and the Laws of the United States which shall be made in Pursuance thereof; and all Treaties made, or which shall be made, under the Authority of the United States, shall be the supreme Law of the Land; and Judges in every State shall be bound thereby, any thing in the Constitution or Laws of any State to the Contrary notwithstanding.***

Throughout history our nation's first people have faced and overcome many attempts by federal and state governments to end our treaty rights thus ending the trust relationship that has been the foundation of our tribe's unique sovereign status. Assimilation, the Dawes Act, forced education/boarding schools; termination, Public Law 280 and relocation were some programs that our country's policymakers enacted to bring an end to the treaty rights of our sovereign tribal nations and members.

At a young age, our parents, grandparents and relatives provided the inspiration and mentoring for us to understand and instill the passion for commitment and service for our children and communities. We are taught by our elders how important it is to understand the historical importance of our treaties, to protect our tribal land base, preserve our resources and guarantee the right for educational equity for our children. As parents, we strive to instill that understanding and dedication to service in our own children and we strive to partner with others who feel the same way.

I am proud to be a member of NIEA, proud to partner in our collective goal of protecting our treaty rights and advocating for our right for educational equity and opportunities for our children.

My father volunteered like many others to defend our country during World War II. He was a warrior and served honorably in the Merrill's Marauders unit of the China Burma Campaign. After the war when he returning to his home on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation my father was stunned to find out that a significant portion of our reservation had been taken by the federal government and converted into a bomb testing area for the military.

My father and many other Lakota families were forced to relocation from their homeland to urban areas located off the reservation. My grandmother Ellen Janis, along with other dedicated grass root community members worked diligently to successfully petition the federal government to return the bombing range back to our tribe. We have thousands of examples of our relatives and allies who dedicated their lives to ensure we stand proud of our identity as indigenous people and to ensure we protect our tribal lands and resources.

We need to continue to strengthen and prepare our children to stand proud of their identity, to be leaders in their community; to be prepared to protect our land bases and natural resources, to be prepared to protect our sacred sites, to be prepared to protect our right for quality health care and to be prepared to advocate for education equity. Most importantly we need to prepare them to ensure the future generations of own children stand strong and proud of their indigenous history, culture and still speaking their native languages and strong in the knowledge of their tribal ceremonies and customs. Investing in our youth is investing in our future as they become the stewards of our land, language and culture.

We honor the historical importance of our treaties. We want our diverse and unique tribal history to be taught appropriately, accurately and respectfully in every classroom across America. Through culturally based education we will truly educate mainstream America to the significant contributions made by our ancestors to this society and

significant contributions our indigenous nations will continue to make. We call on the state departments of education to mandate our public schools teach, explore, and integrate into the core curriculum the historical and contemporary issues and events of our tribal nations and communities.

We can work to prepare our children to be ready for this globalized world of technology, finance, economics and commerce. We want our children to be challenged with a rigorous, relevant curriculum preparing them for post secondary education. We want our children to understand the importance of developing a strong work ethic and to develop the work skills they need to be prepared to choose various career pathways that endorse apprenticeship, technical education and mentoring as a viable method of training. We can create partnerships in our communities to enhance job training opportunities that utilize the knowledge of elders and other resources to mentor our youth to have the tools necessary for successful employment skills for themselves today and for the future.

There is a Dakota proverb that says, “We will be forever known by the tracks we leave behind”

To strengthen our tribal identity, it is important to understand our history, learn from our past, in order to preserve our future. During the early reservation period of the late 1880's, our ancestors were struggling to adapt to the newly created reservation system. Our ancestors were no longer free to hunt buffalo, to travel our vast land base, to trade with our neighbors or wage war if necessary.

It was during this early reservation era that many of our people were without dreams and in despair. When the Ghost Dance religious movement began, many tribes arose in a new spirit of hope. The Ghost Dance religion had great underlying principle that the time would come when the whole Indian race both the living and the dead, will be rejuvenated upon a cleansed earth, our people would live a life of aboriginal happiness, forever free from disease, enslavement, misery and death. When word of the Ghost Dance arrived to the Dakota's, this new hope and a return to prosperity quickly converted many Lakota's.

Fearing another uprising, the reservation agents reacted quickly to arrest suspected leaders of the Ghost Dance Movement. On December 15, Sitting Bull, Hunkpapa Lakota hero of the Little Big Horn was wrongly accused that he one of the driving forces behind the Ghost Dance. Agent James McLaughlin sent Indian police to arrest Sitting Bull; during the attempted arrest Sitting Bull was killed. By December other Lakota leaders including, Minneconju Lakota, leader Big Foot also feared arrest or death, he left the Cheyenne River agency along with 300 other Lakota to seek safety at the Pine Ridge Agency. On December 29, 1890 Big Foot and 250 unarmed men, women and children were massacred by the soldiers of the seventh cavalry.

Located in heart of the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota is the Wounded Knee School District. The school is just eight miles from the single mass grave that memorializes to rest the innocent men, women and children whose lives were taken on that winter day in 1890. Wounded Knee is a school like many other schools in Indian country, struggling daily to overcome the historical trauma and intergenerational grief that many of our native people face. Wounded Knee school district provides educational services to over 120 students in grades k-8. There are 2,000 people who live in the school district and the surrounding area.

Unemployment in the winter months can run as high as 89%, the average family income is less than \$6,000 per year. A recent survey revealed 54 out of 84 families in the school district are homeless which means families double or triple up in homes with as many as 20 people living in a small 2 or 3 bedroom house. Last school year Wounded Knee School made AYP in all grades in reading and math in grades 4 and 8. We would like to recognize and applaud the hard work of the students, teachers, schools leaders and community for their achievement.

As the community continues to strive to meet the strict academic requirements of the Leave No Child Behind Act, Wounded Knee School operates with a 2.2 million dollars backlog in construction repair and maintenance. To quote School Board President Kevin Steele, “a fire could take our school and all we could do is stand there and watch it burn”. Financial stress is daily occurrence at Wounded Knee who operates on only a fraction of the funding allowed. Superintendent Marnee White Wolf, stated, “What would you do when your electricity bill is \$100 and you only have \$43 in your bank to pay it. That is the reality of our school and our underfunded budget.”

My relatives, we all know we are facing critical times in our country. We are grid locked in a financial crisis in our economy, millions of Americans have lost jobs, people unable to meet their mortgage payments are losing their homes and cars, we are involved in two wars and we hear constant threats of global terrorism. We hear financial experts calling for calmness, we hear promises of we will get through this. Let us speak loud and clear, our tribal nations and people are used to facing diversity, we are used to going without, we are tired of being told to **“hang in there” our history speaks for itself.**

Every attempt to assimilate or terminate the rights of all our tribes has failed. We are still here united, resilient, strong and proud. We are modern warriors fighting to protect our inherent treaty rights. Our message united and strong to the federal government is, “Do not forget your promises”.

NIEA has met with various Congressional offices and provided testimony to the Senate Indian Affairs Committee to ensure inclusion in America’s Recovery and Reinvestment Plan. NIEA has requested the economic stimulus package include funding for the following: (1) funding for BIE school construction and facilities improvement and repair under the Department of Interior (2) inclusion of a discreet 1% set aside for BIE school facilities new construction facilities improvement and repair under the 21st Century Green High Performing Schools funding and (3) funding targeted towards high poverty, high minority, and low performing schools, especially schools that have been unable to achieve adequate yearly progress in the last two years.

Many of these projects can be completed within a 24-month time frame and would help to jumpstart the reservation economies in which these school facilities are located by providing significant numbers of jobs in economically depressed areas where unemployment rates have, over decades, been consistently much higher than the national average. These projects are typically the biggest construction projects in these communities and provide often times the only base for economic stimulation and revitalization in these areas.

This funding would be a wise investment in not only the infrastructure on many reservations but also in the education provided to our Native students. Of the 4,495 education buildings in the BIE inventory, half are more than 30 years old and more than 20% are older than fifty years. On average, BIE education buildings are 60 years old; while, 40 years is the average age for public schools serving the general population. 65% of BIE school administrators report the physical condition of one or more school buildings as inadequate. The deferred maintenance backlog is still estimated to be over \$500 million and increases annually by \$56.5 million and five years ago the backlog for construction and repair was reported to have grown to \$942 million, with little progress over the last several years.

In May of 2007, the Office of the Inspector General, Department of Interior issued *Bureau of Indian Affairs and Bureau of Indian Education: Schools in Need of Immediate Action*, a flash report that describes the conditions at BIE schools that require “immediate action to protect the health and safety of students and faculty.” In his conclusion, the Inspector General states that the “failure to mitigate these conditions will likely cause injury or death to children and school employees.” This flash report and concluding statement reveals an alarming and life threatening situation that the federal government cannot afford to overlook. Accessing a fundamental civil right to an education should not be a life or death situation.

NIEA is very enthusiastic to work with President Barack Obama, the new Administration, and the 111th Congress to reverse this situation and implement many of our policy recommendations impacting Indian education. We affirm our commitment to work in partnership with the new Administration and Congress to effectuate positive changes for the future of America’s indigenous tribes, communities, and children. The following are NIEA’s highest priorities for Native education policy, program, and funding changes.

1. Strengthen the governance of Native education at the Department of Education by elevating the position of the Director of Indian education to an Assistant Secretary, coordination of states, tribal governments and communities, neighboring areas, and the federal government working together in developing the educational standards and related assessments through the newly created Assistant Secretary's office, actively utilize the National Advisory Council on Indian Education (NACIE) to promote policies on Indian education within the Department of Education; and develop a memorandum of understanding with the Department of Interior to collaborate and coordinate strategies on improving academic achievement for Native students.

2. For NIEA, revitalizing critically endangered American Indian, Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian languages is among the top of our priorities given the rapid pace of deterioration of Native languages- it is a race against the clock to save Native languages. NIEA encourages the new administration to support the maintenance and survival of Native American languages in accordance with various federal statutes by developing a Native American language grant program at the Department of Education that supports Native language revitalization programs and academic achievement, promoting and supporting the development of public, BIE funded, and charter schools based upon culturally based education and Native language instruction, promoting and supporting teaching strategies that integrate Native traditional and cultural concepts and knowledge into the curricula; and funding research focused on the benefits of culturally relevant curriculum and Native language immersion efforts.

Research demonstrates that Native children perform better academically when they are taught in a manner that is consistent with their traditions, languages, and cultures. For Native people in the United States, our cultural beliefs, traditions, social structures, heritage, and governance systems depend on our Native languages. We conduct our ceremonies, prayers, stories, songs, and dances in our Native languages just as we have done since the beginning of time. Our languages connect us to our ancestors, our traditional ways of life, and our histories. For us, the survival of our cultures and identities is inextricably linked to the survival of our languages. If our languages die, then it is inevitable that our cultures will die next.

Oglala Lakota College, responding to a strong belief that the Lakota language is critically in danger of being lost has taken a consolidated effort to preserve the language. When Oglala Lakota College President Tom Shortbull, asked how many children ages 4 through 6 on the Pine Ridge reservation could speak the Lakota language the response was an estimated 10 children out of 600. Even more distressing statistic was an estimated 95 percent of the Oglala people could no longer converse in Lakota. President Shortbull went to the college board of trustees to seek approval of a Lakota immersion school that will be implemented in the tribal college run Head Start program, later expanding to other centers to evolve into a k-12 Lakota language immersion school. We need to examine and create venues for funding and provide resources for tribal communities and immersion schools who have taken on the task of revitalization and preservation of our indigenous languages.

The Punana Leo was established in 1983 to rescue the Hawaiian language (then) on the brink of extinction—less than 50 speakers below the age of 18. Through the establishment of a statewide system of full day Punana Leo language nest preschools, which use the Native Hawaiian language exclusively, the number of children speakers have increase dramatically and today many former preschoolers are now parents with their own babies in Punana Leo. This culturally appropriate early childhood education system with strong family support and involvement and with strong preschool skills is attached to k-12 education statewide immersion education.

The 2008-2009 enrollment in these schools is approximately 2000. This method has proven to be the most effective means of Native language revitalization. In addition to the Punana Leo integrated model (where students move from preschool, elementary and high school) there is a P-20 education system where students continue through higher education including an indigenous teacher certification which prepares teachers for the immersion program all the way to a PhD in Hawaiian, a Native American language.

The Native Hawaiian Education Council has recently accomplished the tremendous task of gathering input from across the state of Hawaii from Native Hawaiians, stakeholders, educators, families and communities to put forth to the US Department of Education a set of culturally and linguistically aligned indicators to measure impact of Native Hawaiian Education.

3. Understanding Native student's unique cultural and academic needs is an important contributing factor to success in the classroom for Native students. NIEA urges President Obama to issue an Executive Order on Indian Education that promotes interagency collaboration, the use of research based practices in Indian education, and the use of Native language instruction and culturally based education in public and federally funded schools. In many of our communities where there is high mobility of our native students between the public schools and tribal schools, our students are struggling to be on track. We need the Dept of Ed and the BIE to share resources and collaborate to ensure our native children are successful and engaged in learning. We need interagency collaboration to address the growing gang activity and violence effecting our youth and communities. When our youth are detained or incarcerated in juvenile detentions our students must be afforded the same educational resources to have a seem less and successful transition back to school.

4. The national graduation rate for American Indian high school students was 49.3 percent in the 2003–04 school year and Native teenagers suffer from poverty, suicide, teen birth, and substance abuse at rates higher than the national average. Given the current status and situation of Native children, the wellbeing of Native children should be an important national priority. For that reason NIEA is requesting a White House Conference on the needs of Native youth to develop strategies that implement sound cultural appropriate approaches related to the development of Native children which includes their social, emotional, mental, and physical health. NIEA has partnered with the Campaign for High School Equity and together with our allies we are taking on the most the important American civil rights issue of the 21st Century, equity in education. Changing America's high schools for the better is a moral responsibility.

5. Address teacher and school leadership quality and recruitment efforts for Native communities through increased support for Native educators' professional development programs, and provide assistance to schools serving Native students through the Technical Assistance Centers for Indian Education, previously funded by the Department of Education. South Dakota has 9 reservations yet 65% of all our American Indian students attend public school. Out of 9,000 certified teachers in our state less than 1% are American Indians and are employed within the public school system. Although our tribal colleges do a wonderful job of producing elementary teachers, they do not have the resources or funding to produce the core specific middle school or high school teachers. We call on the Department of Education to create programs for our state and tribal colleges to recruit and graduate more native teachers in the secondary education fields.

6. A pattern has developed in recent years where Native education programs get smaller increases in years where overall funding is up and larger cuts in years when overall funding is down. This is unconscionable and must be corrected! Over the years, the budget requests have proposed many significant cuts in Native education, which have deepened the negative effects of previous cuts. If these budget cuts to Native education are not reversed, then Native children and Native communities will be further harmed as well as future generations, especially given the tragic reality that the standard of living in Native communities continues to be far lower than any other group in the United States. NIEA encourages President Obama to improve funding for Indian education programs at the Departments of Education, Interior, and Health and Human Services by

- Establishing a Native Education Budget Task Force to review data and make recommendations to the Administration's budget for upcoming fiscal years;
- Forward fund impact aid and tribal colleges; and
- Fully fund BIE school construction, Indian Head Start and Early Head Start, tribal education departments, the Johnson O'Malley program at BIE, and Title VII of NCLB

7. For the past three school years, only 30% of BIE schools made the AYP goals established by the state in which the school was located. DOE statistics indicate that student performance at BIE schools is lower than for students in public schools. NIEA remains concerned about the applicability of state standards to Native children attending BIE schools given the limited, if any opportunities Tribes have had in the development of these standards.

Tribal communities are in the best position to determine the needs and the appropriate assessment methods for Native students. As the law is currently written, a single tribe, school board or BIE funded school may apply for a waiver, however, considering the significant amount of time and resources needed to successfully submit an application, very few tribes, if any, have been able to submit an application on their own.

Other challenges that have prevented tribes from applying for an alternative definition of AYP include the lack of technical assistance provided to the tribe from the BIE, the lack of funding available to develop the standards and assessments, and the lengthy commitment needed to navigate the process to complete the application. NIEA supports increased resources and expertise at the Bureau of Indian Education to assist tribes and Indian schools that are seeking to develop their own standards and definition of Adequate Yearly Progress and interagency coordination and collaboration to allow BIE schools gain access to the expertise and technical assistance available at the Department of Education.

NIEA encourages the new Administration to adopt these policies and believes with good faith collaboration that we can provide our children with an education that honors their Native identity by incorporating into the curriculum their rich cultural heritage, language, traditions, and native ways of knowing, while simultaneously preparing them for successful futures in contemporary Western society.

In 1868, the Lakota signed a historic document with the United States of America, the Fort Laramie Treaty. The Fort Laramie treaty set forth principles of land ownership and stewardship; it set forth the federal governments responsibility of providing health care, infrastructure and education for our tribes. Article 7 of the treaty states, "In order to insure the civilization of the Indians entering into this treaty, the necessity of education is admitted, especially of such of them as are or may be settled on said agricultural reservations, and they therefore pledge themselves to compel their children, male and female, between the ages of six and sixteen years, to attend school; and it is hereby made the duty of the agent for said Indians to see that this stipulation is strictly complied with; and the United States agrees that for every thirty children between said ages who can be induced or compelled to attend school, a house shall be provided and a teacher competent to teach the elementary branches of an English education shall be furnished, who will reside among said Indians, and faithfully discharge his or her duties as a teacher."

We honor and respect our treaties and we want the federal government to honor and respect our treaties, we are not a special interest group seeking requests or one-time appropriations. We are sovereign nations, with a vested inherent right to quality health care, education and protection of our sacred lands. No amount of money can replace what has been taken, lost or stolen, no amount of money can replace our lost languages, destruction or desecration of our sacred sites but we can move forward to ensure a quality of life that is free from poverty, disease and uncertainty for our children, elders and tribal communities. Education is the answer, education is the key and education must be our priority. As Sitting Bull once said; "Let us put our minds together to see what we can build for our children"

Pilamaya,

Hecetu Yelo

Thank you