WASHINGTON STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

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Providing leadership, support, and advocacy, through policy, so that each student achieves success in school and life

MEMORANDUM

DATE: April 18, 2003

TO: File

FROM: Larry Davis, Executive Director
State Board of Education

RE: Personal Reflection on the First Peoples' Language/Culture Teacher Certification Project

On March 25th, the First Peoples' Language Committee met at the Quinault Beach Resort and Casino at Ocean Shores. Pat (Eirish) and I attended to discuss the forms related to the First Peoples' Language/Culture Teacher Certification pilot project.

During the meeting, I think it was Martina Whelshula who said, to the effect, "...something clicked between two governments and the representatives of two cultures." That comment led to a request for State Board of Education members and staff to provide in writing (or video or audio) their reflections on why they supported/support the pilot project. The responses are intended to help provide a better understanding of why the Board's action in January, happened at that particular time in state history.

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My thoughts on how this process evolved?

Two steps began the process as I remember: 1) A phone call from Suzie Wright, 2) Followed by her sending me a copy of the Concept Paper developed by the First Peoples' Language Committee.

The Concept Paper is a compellingly human statement. The words are emotional and affected me. The paper did more than simply put the issue onto my mental radar screen. It resonated deeply. I knew there was work to be done and that the Board was in a position to contribute toward making a difference, even if the contribution could not guarantee the outcome of preserving and growing First Peoples' languages.

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Larry Davis, Executive Director • (360-725-6025) • TTY (360-664-3631) • FAX (360-586-2357) • Email: sbe@ospi.wednet.edu • www.sbe.wa.gov

My personal pledge was to strongly encourage the Board's Professional Development and Certification Committee to take the lead in seizing a unique opportunity, probably even rare, to make a positive difference for both the Sovereign Tribal Governments and Washington State. I could see the Board using its policy authority in support of stopping further erosion of the cultural heritage of the Sovereign Tribal Governments. In so doing, it would help prevent further erosion of the cultural heritage of Washington State.

The dialogue leading up to the State Board's action on January 17th was mutually respectful. It continues to be so. My perspective is that we were engaged less in negotiation and more in a shared experience of cross-cultural education and understanding. I have learned and continue to learn more about the First Peoples cultural perspective on life and history. My sense is that the First Peoples' friends with whom I have interacted the most, may have discovered something unexpected or seldom realized in their experience: a non-Native state government agency that really wants to work with the First Peoples' community on an issue that is, in fact, important to both communities.

I believe it's been a rewarding experience to date for all involved.

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What made me willing to step out and help move this forward? What made me willing to engage now?

I think I was always willing to step out and become engaged. It's just that that willingness was lying dormant until I received a kick in the pants. The Concept Paper was the kick. It brought the issue into my field of vision with abundant clarity.

Language is essential to the vibrancy of a culture. I have this uncomfortable mental image that the process of watching the cultural vibrancy of a community diminished through the slow loss of its language is like watching life extinguished in the coils of a python. To have not acted would have been one thing. To have not have tried to act would have been shameful. For me, the only option was to try to make a difference. The pride I feel toward the Board for sharing that perspective cannot be measured. I doubt I ever will be more proud of a moment working for the Board than when I called roll on Friday, January 17, 2003.

I have no rational explanation for why the Concept Paper "came to me" when it did. What I know is that after that "event" happened, by and large the rest has been easy.

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Why did I support the effort?

Three reasons. First and fundamentally, I hold a deep personal conviction that this effort is the right thing to do.

Second, this initiative challenged that part of who I am as a person that believes in my ability to work with others to find a solution. I simply thought that in my staff role I could contribute to finding a way for two cultures and two governments to "click," and thereby make a difference.

Third, I think part of my motivation to become engaged was to help set in motion a model of behavior that might have important implications much further down the road. " *What will society be like in 20-50 years for my son who is now 19?"* I likely will live long enough to see a minority-majority population realized in this state. Hopefully, the seeds planted now to respect and celebrate our cultural distinctiveness within the bonds of our common humanity will continue to bear fruit as our demographics change in the ensuing years. Over time, who can say with 100% certainty that this pilot project might not someday be about the preservation of English? I can't. So, while this is an opportunity, now, to make a difference for Native American languages, it is a difference that might need to be replicated for my native language in a future beyond my lifetime.

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What worked here? Why did the Board move forward now rather than delay action? Was it the right time to do it?

These are the "magic" questions. I'll combine them into one: **Why this convergence of human ideals and commitment at this point in history?** I'd love to provide a discreet response and don't think it's possible. I imagine standing on the moon the first time, looking at Earth, trying to comprehend the view. I know I'm witnessing something significant. Yet, I have no practical way to describe it because I have no similar life experience to which it can be compared.

Same goes for trying to develop a discreet explanation for the journey that led to the January 17th roll call. Even though I was part of the journey, I feel like I'm trying to explain an experience that was real, yet surreal, perhaps virtual. Maybe more time needs to pass before I can more fully comprehend why it all came together. Certainly, I think more time must pass before I can more fully comprehend the historical significance of January 15th and 17th.

I regard science as "discovering" what God has already made and that "our" discoveries are revealed to us according to His timetable. Put another way, I often use the "Model T" example when I'm asked why the Board or I didn't do something sooner or

didn't think of something "before now." My response is, "*The same reason the 'Model T' was invented when it was...that was its time to happen.*" Same with the First Peoples' Language/Culture Teacher Certification Pilot Project. It was time for it to happen.

It's not necessary to overanalyze why the timing was right, mostly because I don't think it will get us any closer to a discreet answer. I'm satisfied with believing that a Higher Entity brought together this combined group of people and we were guided to that January 2003 milestone marker on a journey which continues. Perhaps that's all the explanation that is needed. It works for me.

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How can we communicate this - tell the story for others? How can we capture and grow from this to leave a legacy as a gift to share for future generations?

These personal reflections are one way to leave a trail for others to follow. We will put these reflections on the State Board website. Lending a voice and face to the printed words perhaps can be arranged via videotape and/or audiotape. Another avenue to spread the word is to share the reflections with the media and that will be done.

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Can we capture the emotion and passion and urgency you felt?

I consider myself a decent writer. However, at best, the words that follow are a modest effort to describe an experience that cannot be relived. There is no pure way to capture the emotion, passion, and urgency that were expressed at the Board meeting. Both days were special. In my opinion the atmosphere in the room on Friday was anticlimactic to Wednesday. Something extraordinary happened on the 15th and words are inadequate to convey the atmosphere for the public hearing. My memory is that at the beginning of the testimony there was a somewhat nervous hope or expectation about what impact the testimony would have on Board members come Friday. As the testimony unfolded that edgy suspense transformed into a transcendent human spirit. There was an intense, palpable feeling in the air, maybe an ethereal presence that I think everyone felt. Y*ou could cut the air with a knife.*" Only this was a positive breath of air. A weather analogy comes to mind. I vividly remember attending a baseball game at the Atlanta Summer Olympics in 1996. It was a mid-90's day. Throughout the game wave after wave of humidity rolled into and through the stadium. When it hit, I felt like I was wearing wool clothes wrapped in Saran wrap. It was a group sauna. We could virtually "touch" the air.

Tangible intangibility. That's what happened on Wednesday, January 15th. And a bridge was crossed. On the other side was Friday's vote.

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Final Thoughts:

Every journey has an origin. Maybe it's a quiet inspiration. Maybe it's a long-held dream finally put into motion. Maybe it's a BFOB (Blinding Flash of the Obvious). an "ah hah" moment, Maybe it's just taking a step, not realizing a special journey has been launched. Maybe it's fate, kismet, destiny, divine guidance. Whatever the reason, I'm glad I'm part of this journey.

I'm growing as a person as I become better acquainted and gain a deeper appreciation of a culture that predates the history of the Washington Territory. The journey is reaffirming my belief that we can and should celebrate diversity within our shared humanity.

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I'm grateful the First Peoples' Language Committee made the request. The opportunity to step back, pause, and reflect on what happened has been valuable.
I am very interested in learning from the First Peoples' community their reflections on what has transpired and how they would answer the questions.

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WALKING THE TRAIL:

One Man's Journey Along The Cherokee Trail Of Tears

Jerry Ellis

"We're all only fragile threads, but what a tapestry we make."

"...That's what I find so rich about America: it's many worlds at once."

GREETINGS IN TUWADUQUTSID

(Skokomish Tribe)

Assayable (boss aye alb)
may goodness envelope you

bikWihi'†3w3l (bee kwee hee too wall)
praise one another