

Remarks for
Pacific Educational Conference

by Peter A. Prahar

Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United States of America

China-FSM Friendship Sports Center
College of Micronesia

Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia

July 19, 2011

The Pacific Child: Cultivating and Preserving the Pacific Identity

Please allow me to begin by extending my respect and courtesy to this land on which we stand, Pohnpei “Pei Sarawi,” to the traditional leaders who honored us with their presence at this morning’s Opening Ceremony; to the village elders, community representatives, and people of Pohnpei.



Lieutenant Governor of the State of Pohnpei, The Honorable Churchill Edward; PREL President and CEO Sharon Nelson-Barber; Members of the PREL Board of Directors; Professor Graham Smith, who delivered the eloquent and thoughtful keynote address at the Opening Ceremony this morning; Interim President of the College of Micronesia Ringlen Ringlen; Former President of the College of

Micronesia Spensin James; and President of the Palau Community College Dr. Patric Tellei.

I would also like to recognize the organizers of this important conference and all those who have worked so hard on the event, including those who presented the sakau ceremony at the Opening Ceremony. What a wonderful example of the Pacific Identity we seek to cultivate and preserve in our schools, in our communities, and in our nations.



Also, thanks to the presenters at the breakout sessions. Clearly a lot of work and thought has gone into to them, and I'm sure all attendees will find them of great value. I was able to attend three sessions today and only wish I could attend them all.

Finally, I would like to extend special recognition and congratulations to all the Teachers of the Year from all the delegations who are here this evening. Teaching well is a tough job and, frankly, one that often does not get the rewards and recognition it deserves. So I'm glad to see that at this event, at least, those who have been recognized as the "best of the best" have been invited and are being acknowledged. I'm sure that there are many "close runners up" back home, too, and ask you to convey to them my thanks for their efforts as well.



As Ambassador, I'm often asked why I take such an interest in education, why I visit classrooms whenever and wherever I can, and maybe why I am not satisfied with discussing education over tea and crackers with government officials.

Well, a good part of the explanation is that I work for two people who have put education front and center on the U.S. domestic and foreign policy agenda:

- Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who, after all, wrote the book *It Takes A Village*, has worked for over 30 years on children's and educational issues, and has brought that commitment to her position as Secretary of State; and
- President Barak Obama, who has made improved education performance – from pre-school to post-graduate – a centerpiece of his administration.

Both President Obama and Secretary Clinton understand that if we are going to have a healthy, prosperous, and peaceful future it begins with and demands a great education for everyone, everywhere.

So thank you for the invitation to attend this conference and to speak to you briefly – and I promise to be relatively brief – this evening.

The theme for this year's Pacific Education Conference – ***The Pacific Child: Cultivating and Preserving the Pacific Identity*** – is, I know, of intense interest to everyone: nations, communities, parents, teachers, and especially the children of the Pacific.

We can see every day and everywhere that the world is rushing in, encountering the various peoples and cultures of the Pacific, and threatening to overwhelm them with the richness and variety of the goods, services, and ideas of the ever-evolving 21st century, global culture. And, in truth, over the last century, the introduction of cash economies, mass produced agricultural and industrial goods, labor mobility and migration, and now the Internet have all changed Pacific Island peoples and cultures.

Too often we can only look on these changes with regret. Too often something valuable was lost. Too often something tawdry or valueless was gained.

But I think we all recognize that these changes offered opportunities as well. I would suggest that rather than viewing these changes as a threat to the Pacific Identity, it would be more constructive to view globalization as an opportunity to promote, preserve, and showcase the Pacific Identity.



So, what is to be done? How can we prepare the Pacific Child to cultivate and preserve the Pacific Identity? How can we promote, preserve, and showcase the Pacific Identity through education?

Let me – a non-teacher – offer five thoughts on this.

First, embrace the need for a great education for the Pacific Child.

Notice I said “great education” and not “good education.” I assume everyone has bought into the concept of a good education for the Pacific Child. I also assume you understand that we are living in a time of incredible – even revolutionary – change in the world. But you may not realize that the changes that are taking place in the world are so extraordinary that aiming to equip a Pacific Child with a “pretty good” education isn’t good enough anymore.

The Pacific Child of today, over the course of his lifetime – over the next 50 years – is going to have to deal with the challenges of global population growth, increased demand for resources, incredible developments in science and technology, advances in access to information, the nature of 21st century conflict, the growth of multinational organizations, and the emergence of global patterns in language, culture, and entertainment.

The Pacific Child of today, over the course of his lifetime – over the next 50 years – is going to have to deal with the challenge of global climate change as well. Some – too many – in the Pacific will find that the way of life they grew up in is simply no longer possible. And everyone in the Pacific will be impacted in ways big and small.

So the Pacific Child of today will need a great – not just a “good” – education in order to compete and contribute in this new world.



The Pacific Child of today will need a great – not just a “good” – education to cultivate and preserve his Pacific Identity in this new world.

The Pacific Child of today will need a great – not just a “good” – education to, as Professor Graham Smith said in the Keynote Address at the Opening Ceremony, achieve excellence in both his own culture and be able to participate in the global economy; there is no “either/or.”

The Pacific Child of today will need a great – not just a “good” – education to continue to draw on his Pacific Identity as a source of strength as he goes about his life in the hectic world of the 21st century.

Second, make sure everyone – from parents to political leaders – understands that a great education requires enormous effort – and not just from the teachers and staffs of the schools.



Everyone must understand that a great education is rooted in the home, the community, and the culture. Of course, a great education requires a strong, coherent, relevant curriculum, dedicated and professional teachers, and adequate resources and facilities. But, above all, it requires parents and communities that support and value education and, in this way, motivate students to learn.

If you doubt the value of and need for a community ethic that supports and values education, just look at the success of Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and China. Fifty years ago they were among the poorest in the world, thought to be overpopulated, thought to have few resources, and thought to have dim prospects for development. What they did have, however, was communities and cultures committed – wholly committed – to the value of education. They believe that tomorrow will be better than today if and only if they prepare themselves for it.

I was in South Korea last month – my first visit since 1975. When I lived there 35 years ago, it was one of the poorest countries in the world. Today it is among the wealthiest. As I traveled around the country, it seemed that everything around me had changed but the people. They were still kind, generous, and very, very proud of being Korean, and very, very proud of everything Korean. Even incredible economic development had not destroyed their culture or values. Instead it has strengthened them and given them the resources to do so. Today, for example, the

country is covered with new schools, universities, and museums and with restored temples, churches, and other cultural and historical sites.

In South Korea, by the way, teachers are called “nation builders” – and no wonder.



So I suggest that you work to capitalize on the collective cultures of the Pacific communities to promote an ethic that supports and values education. You already have at hand the cultural values and traditions to cultivate and preserve the Pacific Identity. After all: “It takes a village to raise a child.” *Is that not the Pacific Way?*

Encourage – or, rather, demand – meaningful parental and community participation and accountability. Encourage – or, rather, demand – education that is rooted in the home, the community, and the culture.

Third, go back to your schools and tell your students what they need to do to become great students.

Tell them it is not as hard as it sounds and that even a poor student can become a great student with dedication and hard work.

Tell them a great student understands that one of the best ways to learn is to help others learn. Then set up opportunities for this to happen in the classroom. As Professor Smith said this morning, everyone has a responsibility to share knowledge. Everyone has a responsibility to ensure that no one is left behind. This is part of the Pacific Identity.



Tell them a great student involves his parents in his education. Then ask them to make a habit of discussing what they learned in school that day and every day with their parents. This, too, is part of the Pacific Identity.

Tell them a great student reads like his life depends on it, because, in fact, it does. Then set up opportunities for them to read and report back on anything that interests them – over and over again. Science fiction, detective novels, biographies, magazines, stuff off the Internet – anything they can get their hands on. And let them do it over and over again until it becomes second nature.

Tell them a great student understands that he or she has to become personally engaged in learning in order to become a great student. Set up opportunities for your students to become experts on something – anything will do. But here's a chance for your student – the Pacific Child – to cultivate his Pacific Identity. He can become an expert on the history of his home island; its plants, fish, and animals; its geography; the variety of people who live here; the stars above it and the seas around it; organic farming; traditional medicines; health issues – the possible topics are endless.

Tell them a great student understands that a great education is not something that is static, something that is completed and done with. A great student understands that a great education involves a lifetime of learning. In the U.S., for instance, we estimate that a young person entering the work force today will have 14 different career changes during his working life. This pales before the challenges facing the Pacific Child over the next 50 years, many of whom will be living through complete upheavals of their childhood ways of life. Every Pacific Child will have to learn new skills, learn new things, constantly over the next 50 years. Make sure they leave your school – make sure they leave your care – with the tools for a lifetime of learning.



Finally, tell them a great student understands that he or she has been given a great opportunity by his community. As the Pacific Child moves on in his education and his life, ask him to think about how he can give back to his community. Create opportunities for the Pacific Child to start “giving back” while in school. Aim to make “giving back” a lifetime habit. This, too, is part of the Pacific Identity.

Fourth, knowing that many of the young people temporarily entrusted to your care will be living and working for at least part of their lives in other countries, set yourselves the goal of raising not one or two, but an entire generation of Pacific ambassadors.

Understand that one does not need to work in an embassy or have been appointed by a president to be an ambassador. An ambassador – a real ambassador – is someone who represents his culture, his community, and his community’s values – and by his life and example debunks stereotypes.



Of course this underscores my first point: the importance of a great education. Equip the next generation of Micronesians with the tools to represent the “Pacific

Identity” with honor. Ensure that they can assess the past, present, and future of their islands through a strong foundation of analytical skills learned in the classroom and in the community. Ensure they have the learning skills to acquire new workplace skills in order to compete and succeed. Ensure they have the leadership skills to step forward as ambassadors.

Fifth, and last but certainly not the least important, work to ensure that the Pacific Child is healthy enough to grasp the opportunities and choices a great education will open for him.

The people of the Pacific are facing a health catastrophe as a result of what are called “life-style” diseases: diabetes, high blood pressure, coronary heart disease.

The word “catastrophe” – usually applied to natural disasters like typhoons, tsunami, and earthquakes – is not too strong. It is a humanitarian catastrophe, of course. We can all think of a number of people – some close to us - who have died decades prematurely as a result of these diseases. And it has become a financial catastrophe as well, as the cost of treating patients with these diseases is bankrupting health and national budgets.

We can trace these lifestyle diseases directly to the epidemic of childhood and adult obesity caused by consumption of large amounts of saturated fat, salt, and refined carbohydrates. All these are found in imported canned goods and rice. All are found in extraordinary amounts in “junk foods” like soda pop, ramen, and potato chips.

I ask you – for the sake of the Pacific Child and your communities’ futures – to get this garbage out of the schools and out of the students’ mouths. Ban these foods from the school’s cafeteria. Ban these foods from the teachers’ lunchroom. Ban them from the entire school. Ban them starting this school year. Period.

Think about it. We don’t allow children to smoke at school. We don’t allow children to drink alcohol at school. Why should we let them eat foods that are, in all honesty, just as great a threat to their health? Why should we let them develop dietary habits that will lead to health problems and premature death as surely as – and sometimes faster than - abuse of alcohol or tobacco?

So, use the school to send a message, one that will resonate throughout the community. Use the school to make a healthy diet a lifetime habit. Use the example of the school to leverage and legitimize comprehensive and mainstreamed wellness programs at all levels of instruction. Use the school to teach the Pacific

Child to respect himself and his culture by taking care of his body with nutritious food indigenous to his island.



Make it possible for the Pacific Child to be healthy enough to cultivate and preserve the Pacific Identity.

So, there you have it: Five ideas I hope you will find of use – or at least thought- and discussion-provoking – as we work together to educate the Pacific Child and cultivate and preserve the Pacific Identity.

For the educators here from the FSM, I assure you that, in the United States, you have a partner prepared to assist you in establishing an effective public education system – one we can and will all be proud of. I have met many of you in your offices and classrooms over the last year and a half. I am looking forward to continuing to visit your schools to see what you are accomplishing.



Thanks to everyone here for the work you do day in and day out. As I said at the beginning, teaching well is a tough job and one that often does not get the rewards and recognition it deserves. Let's work to change that – for the sake of the Pacific Child and the Pacific Identity.

On behalf of Secretary Clinton, President Obama, and the American people, I wish you all the best in meeting the challenge of educating the Pacific Child for the 21st century, in preparing the Pacific Child to cultivate and preserve the Pacific Identity. Thank you.



Ambassador Peter A. Prahara

Peter A. Prahara, a career member of the Senior Foreign Service, was sworn in as U.S. Ambassador to the Federated States of Micronesia on December 14, 2009. Most recently, he served as the Transnational Crime Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. Prior to this assignment, he was Deputy Director then Director of the Office of Asian, African and European Programs in the Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement. His previous assignments also include tours in the People's Republic of China, Japan, Albania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali and as desk officer for Rwanda. He served with the CSCE Mission in Kosovo in 1993 and returned to Kosovo in 1998 to assist in establishing a U.S. observer mission. He also served as a linguist in the U.S. Air Force from 1971-1975 with assignments in South Korea and Taiwan. Mr. Prahara graduated from the University of Michigan with a B.A. in Political Science. A native of Oregon, he and his wife married in 1977 when both were students at International Christian University in Tokyo.