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**Health, Education and Human Services Committee considers  
idea of restructuring school boards to emphasize quality education**

*Report by Department of Diné Education regarding negative school board situations sparks idea*

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Favoritism, nepotism, and questionable hiring practices were all concerns that emerged from a Health, Education and Human Services Committee meeting on June 27 after the committee received status update reports from the Department of Diné Education (DoDE) regarding two separate instances involving the school boards of two Navajo Nation community schools.

In his report, Phil Belone, senior education specialist at DoDE’s Office of Monitoring, Evaluation, and Technical Assistance (OMETA), apprised the committee of administrative climates at the Shonto Preparatory School (K-8) and Hunter’s Point boarding school – both located in Arizona.

According to Belone, allegations about recent “retaliatory” actions of school board members at both schools in response to unfavorable decisions by school administrators had caused rifts at the schools.

“It might be time to consider having DoDE and the Navajo Elections Administration look into regional school boards,” said Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinon, Whippoorwill) at the close of the report.

He and Council Delegate Joshua Lavar Butler (Tó Nanees Dizi) were compelled to explore the idea of regionalizing school boards in an effort to alleviate conflicts of interest and nepotism at the local level.

Delegate Witherspoon’s rationale was that, perhaps, regional school board members would be better able to focus on helping schools improve delivery of quality education to students if board members were not directly from a community where chances of becoming involved in local politics is greater.

“If we regionalize, it also makes the positions more competitive,” Delegate Butler said.

Above all, the idea of regional school boards ensures that the focus remains on decisions being made in the best interests of Diné students and their education, the committee said, rather than personal agendas.

In May, the Navajo Board of Education declared a reduction in work force at the Shonto school due to the school’s inability to meet the AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) standard for the past four years.

The AYP is a performance indicator prescribed by the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001.

Those community members who were close to the school employees that were released from employment at the Shonto school, were unhappy with the principal’s involvement in the matter, and called upon their chapter officials and council delegates for support.

Belone said in Hunter's Point, a principal recently resigned because, allegedly, two school board members with a vendetta against the principal purposely stopped attending school board meetings so there would be no quorum to approve renewal of the principal's contract.

However, Belone said that in spite of the reported episode, the new acting principal is making sure that school operations are moving forward.

The committee has placed responsibility with DoDE to investigate the allegations of misconduct and questionable hiring practices at both schools.

Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels) requested for DoDE to provide a written report of the two situations involving the Shonto and Hunter's Point schools that Belone discussed in his oral report that morning. It is due for delivery before the committee at their next meeting on July 6.

In addition, the committee directed DoDE to submit a plan that would outline how the department would restructure local school boards into regional boards if the decision to move in that direction is handed down. The plan is due to the committee on July 25.

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