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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee receives report from the Navajo Head Start Program

FORT DEFIANCE, Ariz. – On Wednesday, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee accepted a report regarding the Navajo Head Start Program.

The Head Start Program seeks to empower children and their families in Navajo communities by offering a variety of services such as dental, vision, nutrition, behavior development and mental wellness, according to their website. The program is divided into land sections that serve each of the Nation's five agencies.

Olin Kieyoomie, policy council president for the Head Start Program, said the program is ready to become its own separate entity similar to Diné College and Navajo Technical University.

"The problem that faces us, is external. Currently we have 96 qualified Head Start teachers that have a masters or bachelor's degree ready to work here on the reservation, but the qualification forms are stuck at the Department of Personnel Management," stated Kieyoomie.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinon, Whippoorwill) recommended the committee write a letter to the Navajo Nation Department of Justice, inviting several entities to assist in moving this initiative forward.

"Certainly invite Head Start, committee members, and the policy council to discuss the options of how to essentially become separate—either as a school district or enterprise—to begin to manage on their own," stated Delegate Witherspoon.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Joshua Lavar Butler (Tó Nanees Dizi) questioned the timing of the proposal by Head Start.

"I do speak in support of exploring ways Head Start can be independent. But I am not 100% sure yet and convinced that they can fully manage it. You know the history. You had a very rough history with Head Start. I think maybe a couple of years, three years from now, perhaps we can explore that option," stated Delegate Butler.

In 2006, the Administration for Children and Families forced the shutdown of the program when it was found that a number of Head Start employees had criminal history. This action subsequently threatened the status of federal funding for the Head Start Program.

Since then, funding has been restored and the program continues to rebuild.

“Head Start is one of the oldest programs , since 1965, this program has been on the Navajo Nation. After this review, I think that would be a really good step in introducing something at summer session before Council. We do understand the challenges that we face,” stated Kieyoomia.

HEHSC members voted 4-0 to accept the report.

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