



THE NAVAJO NATION

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## President Begaye meets with U.S. Department of Education, Bureau of Indian Education



*Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez met with the U.S. Department of Education and Bureau of Indian Education and discussed issues ranging from the Accountability Work Book to the creation of school districts for BIE schools on the Nation. (Photo by Rick Abasta)*

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.— Look at the bigger picture.

That was the message Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye told federal officials from the U.S. Department of Education and Bureau of Indian Education recently during their visit to Window Rock.

President Begaye said a holistic approach is needed to solve the educational challenges facing students on the Navajo Nation, rather than focusing only on meeting school standards.

“When our Navajo people

signed the Treaty of 1868, this is what those leaders were looking at,” President Begaye said. “That education is about meeting the basic needs of students, teachers and communities.”

During the July 22 meeting, President Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez were joined by the Dine’ Department of Education to discuss the state of the tribal education system.

President Begaye said looking at the bigger picture means taking into consideration the housing situation on the Nation,

which affects both teachers and students.

Teachers leave the Nation, often when they meet their commitment to repay federal loans, or when they are unable to find adequate housing. For students, they face housing conditions such as the lack of electricity.

“Our students ability to learn is hampered. One high school student recently told us that he had to study every night with a flashlight,” President Begaye said. “Now, for the first time,

he and his siblings can flip on a light and study.

“You have to look at that and ask yourself, ‘What’s the learning environment at the house?’ NAHASDA has opened the door to this kind of thinking,” he added.

The Native American Housing and Self Determination Act was created to construct safe and sanitary housing for tribal nations and their members.

However, as the years progressed, the U.S. Housing and Urban Development

realized unique situations that exist on reservations, which affect the housing effort.

These included the need for infrastructure such as electricity, water and roads. Eventually, other opportunities emerged that allowed NAHASDA funding to be utilized for community centers.

“They invest in more than just housing, now they are building communities. They recently completed a youth center in Shiprock with HUD funding,” President Begaye said.

Before bringing the 32 BIE schools under the Navajo Nation, President Begaye said the tribe must first review the function of the school boards at those schools.

He said the creation of school districts would allow larger schools to assist the smaller schools.

President Begaye said, “We need to focus on the children, rather than who controls the dollars and who has the authority.”

“I am more open to the district approach, where you have schools helping each other. Rather than 66 school boards, you wind up with five to ten school boards that oversee the schools, so we can better manage them,” said President Begaye.

The district approach can also be the framework for establishing Saturday classes, tutoring, and math schools. This effort could provide other opportunities such as bringing in college professors and providing internships for college students to help the schools.

“That can be better managed by a district, than by a single school board at a small community trying to do those things,” President Begaye said.

Vice President Nez said the recent referendum election shed light on the Navajo language and brought it to the forefront of Navajo consciousness.

“There’s going to be a lot more

people wanting to learn Navajo and we need to prepare for that. That was the positive thing that came out of this election, people are all in agreement that the Navajo language is vital for our future,” he said.

President Begaye and Vice President Nez challenged Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey to provide more resources for the instruction of Navajo language at public schools.

“The Navajo Nation, as a sovereign nation, should be in the drivers seat for all our young people’s education,” Vice President Nez said. “The Bureau of Education is tasked here to provide technical assistance and partnership.”

Promoting a healthy lifestyle at the tribal schools and stepping away from junk food being served to students is another consideration, he said.

“Students learn better when they’re healthy and when they eat well,” Vice President Nez said.

President Begaye said the goal of their administration is for the Navajo Nation to control its own schools, including the public schools located on Navajo.

He reported that schools with Navajo teachers and a majority leadership of Navajo school board members are outperforming other schools in surrounding communities like Farmington, Aztec and Albuquerque.

“We know that our students are smart and that they can achieve at a very high level,” said President Begaye.



President Russell Begaye said Navajo students perform at a higher level academically when schools have Navajo teachers and the school boards are comprised mainly of Navajo board members. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



Vice President Jonathan Nez said Navajo schools also need to incorporate healthy food to replace junk food to enhance student performance. He said Navajo sovereignty dictates that the tribe is in control of education. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



Sharone Pasternak, an attorney with the U.S. Department of Education, asked the fundamental question about BIE schools. Do they have their own school boards, she asked. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

