



CONTACT: Charmaine Jackson
Communications Director
Office: (928) 871-7884
Cell: (928) 637-5507
charmainejackson@navajo-nsn.gov

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President Shelly Directs Task Team to Address Head Start Proposed Funding Cuts

Window Rock, AZ—Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly directed a task team and the Department of Diné Education to begin the administrative process of preparing and negotiating for an increase to the proposed funding cuts by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Head Start today. President Shelly expects to receive recommendations and begin taking action by the end of July.

“We have assigned a task team to make recommendations and take necessary actions to ensure direct services to our children and families are not disrupted,” said President Shelly. “I have also directed Navajo Head Start to develop a detailed budget plan to address the proposed funding cuts. My administration will begin negotiating for a higher rate of cost per child to continue our direct services.”

In a letter received by President Shelly, the ACF, Office of Head Start notified the Nation of its intent to reduce base funding because of the program continues to be chronically under enrolled.

According to the Head Start Act, ACF has the authority recapture, withhold, or reduce the base grant. When a program operates at less than 97 percent of enrollment after a plan to reduce or eliminate under enrollment has not been successful.

Navajo Head Start has been funded to serve 4,073 children and 60 of those slots are for children from birth to age 3 and pregnant women. Historically since 2001, Navajo Head Start has never been fully enrolled. For the past several years, Navajo Head Start’s enrollment has fluctuated between 2,000-2,500 children due to lack of adequate facilities and staffing.

AFC’s letter stated, “We are reducing the base Head Start grant by 48% for a new funded enrollment in the Navajo Nation Head Start Program 2,086. The Head Start Program base grant will be \$14,755,405 effective November 1, 2011. In addition, we are reducing the base Early Head Start grant by 38 percent for a new funded enrollment of 38. The Early Head Start Program base grant will be \$385,037.”

“We have been meeting with Head Start management for the past month and working to address long-standing legal and audit issues,” Department of Diné Education Superintendent Andrew Tah said. “We face unique challenge because of our remote classroom locations, travel expenses and the ability to effectively conduct home visits.”

Since 2001, the Department of Diné Education and Head Start have been plagued with budget issues, dilapidated facilities, and lack of qualified teachers applying for positions. Each Head Start facility is required to have a credentialed teacher, teacher's aide, cook, and bus driver. It is a complex program; there are over 2,800 federal regulations to comply with. Nationwide, Head Start receives varied amounts of costs per child.

As a Head Start program that provides services within an area greater than West Virginia, and extremely limited resources the Navajo Nation, the task force will focus on educating ACF on the unique needs of Navajo Head Start Children and families.

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