



**JOE SHIRLEY, JR.**  
*President*

**FRANK J. DAYISH, JR.**  
*Vice-President*

## THE NAVAJO NATION

**For Immediate Release**  
Dec. 2, 2005

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### Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr., announces his selection of six members to new Navajo Nation Board of Education

**WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.** – In yet another step toward making education his administration's top priority, Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., has announced his selection of the first six members of the new, 11-member Navajo Nation Board of Education.

They are GloJean Todacheene of Shiprock, N.M., Juanita Benally of Coyote Canyon, Rebecca Benally of Montezuma Creek, Utah, Marjorie Dodge of Crownpoint, N.M., Dr. Phil Bluehouse of Ganado, and Vee F. Browne-Webster of Blue Gap. The six are expected to be confirmed by the Navajo Education Committee on Dec. 9.



*With President Shirley are five of his six appointees to the new Navajo Nation Board of Education, created through the Diné Sovereignty in Education Act.*

*From left to right is Director of Diné Education Leland Leonard, GloJean Todacheene, Juanita Benally, President Shirley, Rebecca Benally, Marjorie Dodge and Dr. Phil Bluehouse.*

“As Navajo people, we are very serious about making our own way with the education of our children,” President Shirley said at a Dec. 1 press conference in his office.

“From our experience, we know that much of the methodology used to teach our children in the classrooms is not working, and this is the reason some of our children do not do well in school,” he said. “We want to change that around.”

– MORE –

That change will occur through the *Diné Sovereignty in Education Act* – amendments to Title 10 of the Nation’s education code. Last July 19, the Navajo Nation Council overwhelmingly supported the reform bill 59 to 19.

The new law created an 11-member Navajo Nation Board of Education, elevated the Division of Diné Education to a Department of Diné Education, calls for the hiring of a Navajo Superintendent of Schools, the development Navajo-specific standards of education, and creates a database of information regarding Navajo student academic achievement. The law is also expected to see that Navajo students’ education is infused with Navajo language and culture.

***“We want to turn out Navajo students who will continue to have us be Navajo people in the future.”***

***– President Shirley***

The remaining five members of the Navajo Board of Education are to be elected in next year’s general election.

“As we continue to move forward with the plans for the education of our children, we will continue to borrow from foreign ways,” the President said. “Where they fail, we will fill in with our own ways.”

Mary Maryboy, a Navajo Nation Council delegate representing Mexican Water, Aneth and Red Mesa, who came to give support to Rebecca Benally who is from his community, said he’s confident the appointments will be confirmed.

“I feel very good when I hear the importance of the Navajo culture, Navajo language,” Mr. Maryboy

said. “We’ve kind of moved away from our ancestral ways of language and it’s good we’ve begun to bring Navajo language, Navajo culture back to our communities.”

The President has often stated to students, parents and educators alike that knowing the Navajo language, culture and clan system will best prepare a Navajo student for both academic and life’s challenges. He said Navajo people we have much to offer to the world.

“We want to get at turning out Navajo students who will be successful at standing on their own, it doesn’t matter the challenge,” he said. “We want our kids going to school and getting a good solid education. That will propel them to standing on their own, to being able to be a contributing member of society. We want to turn out Navajo students who will continue to have us be Navajo people in the future.”

Leland Leonard, executive director of the Department of Diné Education, said the new law paves the way for using the Navajo language and culture to define Navajo AYP – Annual Yearly Progress – and building the Nation’s own standards and curriculum.

“This is a wonderful and unique opportunity for the Navajo Nation to show the world we mean business as far as our own education is concerned,” Mr. Leonard said.

He added it was a pleasant coincidence that of the 17 people to submit letters of interest, the six appointees each have a Masters degree.

“We didn’t plan on having individuals of this caliber,” he said. “All have graduate degrees. That’s amazing. That’s an amazing feat to have your own people be critical thinkers for us.”

Rebecca Benally, a school principal at Montezuma Creek, said it was an historic day because this group will make decisions for the education of the next generation of Navajo students.

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“My motto is it takes a community to educate a child, and I truly believe that,” she said. “Teaching is in every minute, in every hour, and in every day. We can’t let any moment go by.”

GloJean Todacheene, who received a \$25,000 fellowship from the Milken Foundation in 1994 for excellence in education, said one of the things the foundation believes is that the future belongs to the learned.

“We have never valued the Navajo language like we should because from boarding school days they were trying to deny us that language,” she said. “How neat it would be to have Harry Potter stories in the Navajo language.”

“I am really thrilled because we’re going to be in charge and we’re going to determine our own destiny,” she said.

Because the six will represent a quorum, they will be able to conduct business as soon as they are confirmed, Mr. Leonard said. After electing officers, their first task will be the selection of a Navajo superintendent, whom he said would be a Navajo individual. Next will be to create a plan of operation.

The education reforms of the *Diné Sovereignty in Education Act* reflect the dream of Navajo leaders since the Treaty of 1868 and every Navajo chairman and president since the Navajo Business Council was created by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1923, Mr. Leonard said.

“Philosophically, I think every Navajo chairman and president had something to do with it,” Mr. Leonard said. “But it wasn’t until President Shirley was able to make education part of his platform and his number one priority. That, and the true commitment from the Navajo Education Committee and working cooperatively with the Division of Diné Education staff, made it possible.”

“Our leaders foresaw into the future that one day we would have our own education system,” he said. “The Division of Navajo Education was established by former Chairman Peter MacDonald. It wasn’t until former President Peterson Zah came on the scene 1984 that Title 10, the education law, was codified. Now, under President Shirley, we have the *Diné Sovereignty in Education Act*.”

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**ADDITIONAL SOURCE**

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