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**Statement of the  
Navajo Nation Council  
Education Committee  
on the Summary Suspension of the  
Navajo Nation Head Start and Early Head Start Programs**

**May 2, 2006**

**Background.** The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has issued, effective May 2, 2006, a notice of summary suspension to the Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley Jr. regarding the Navajo Nation Head Start and Early Head Start Programs. Under the conditions of the summary suspension, the Navajo Nation is prohibited from making any new expenditure or incurring any new obligations from Head Start funds in connection with its Head Start and Early Head Start programs. ACF identified several bases for taking this action, including the failure of the Navajo Nation to check appropriate criminal records for Head Start and Early Head Start employees, among other items. ACF also indicated that as the conditions creating the summary suspension are addressed, the suspension can be lifted in full or in part. In order for the suspension to be lifted in full, the Navajo Nation must demonstrate that it has corrected all the conditions affecting both its Head Start and Early Head Start programs.

**The Education Committee states that the Navajo Nation's first priority must be the well-being of our children in these important programs.** As the Navajo Nation addresses the suspension, we must act and plan with the well-being of our children foremost in our minds. Regrettably, this suspension is not a complete surprise. For several years, the Education Committee has sought to address with the Navajo Head Start program the many concerns brought to it by Head Start parents and Head Start employees. Unfortunately, not all the leadership of the Navajo Head Start program was willing to address these issues in a spirit of cooperation and critical self-examination. Thus, it has been impossible to correct these problems before they reached the current crisis level. Now is the time for a clear examination of these vitally important programs so that, for Head Start children and families, they deliver on their promise of a safe and healthy environment that provides early education programs that truly give Navajo kids a head start.

**The Education Committee will be meeting in emergency session on Wednesday, May 3, 2006.** At this meeting, the Committee will review all the available information on the suspension as well as options for addressing the identified deficiencies and getting the suspension lifted. As we also have a responsibility to hold accountable the appropriate Navajo officials who have been responsible for administering the Head Start and Early Head Start programs, the Committee will examine what steps are necessary to provide for proper accountability.

**The Education Committee will be conducting hearings to evaluate the Head Start/Early Head Start Program.** In the coming weeks and months, the Education Committee will hold several hearings in order to take testimony from Navajo Nation officials, Head Start parents, children and employees, regarding their concerns with the Navajo Head Start program and ways to improve the program.

**The Education Committee will develop appropriate legislative action.** As more information comes out on the status of the Head Start/Early Head Start programs, the Committee will evaluate whether there is a need for a change in Navajo law and policy, or whether existing law and policies are sufficient but were simply not followed. If change is needed, the Education Committee will develop recommendations for consideration by the full Council.

**This program will be saved, and it will be a better program as a result of this crisis.** In Navajo culture, the care of children is our highest value. As painful as it is to go through this crisis, this is also an opportunity to make the hard decisions necessary in order to bring about the kind of positive change in these programs that will greatly benefit our children. The Navajo Nation Head Start and Early Head Start Programs, under the right leadership, should be - and someday will be - great programs, looked to from all over the United States as a model of what Head Start should be.

The Education Committee intends to fight to assure that the rights of Head Start parents and children are fully respected and that a safe, healthy and educationally appropriate environment is established in every Navajo Head Start and Early Head Start facility. The Education Committee also urges Navajo Head Start/Early Head Start employees, who have suffered from low morale for several years, to stick with this program and do their utmost to help them through these difficult times.

**Conclusion.** It is of paramount importance to the Navajo Nation that the problems with Navajo Head Start and Early Head Start are corrected, that our children's health and safety is assured, that a quality early childhood development program is put in place, and that control of these programs is appropriately restored under capable Navajo management. With Head Start graduations just around the corner, it would be easy to be disheartened by the Federal suspension of these programs. Nonetheless, although the coming months may prove difficult, the result will be a better program and a brighter future for our kids. That is what Head Start is all about.

Sincerely,

Leonard Chee, Chairman  
Education Committee of the Navajo Nation Council