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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Vice Chairman of the Navajo Nation Council's Education Committee Wallace Charley (Shiprock) released the following statement:

To the Navajo Nation People:

In the last week, the Navajo Nation Council Education Committee has held four meetings to address the recent summary suspension of the Navajo Head Start program by the United States government, through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. On May 9th, the Committee also heard the official performance audit report of the Head Start Program from the Navajo Nation Auditor General. It was the Education Committee that requested the audit of this program in 2004.

The Federal government and the Navajo Nation's own audit have found serious problems in the operation and management of the Navajo Nation Head Start Program. In fact, the Committee has been raising questions about the program for some time, but has not received satisfactory answers from the Navajo Nation executive branch. Hopefully, the Federal suspension, no matter how painful, that in the end, it be a good thing if it leads to a better program for our Navajo children, families and communities.

Last year, the Education Committee brought to the Navajo Nation Council legislation that made significant changes to our tribal education laws. The Navajo Nation established its own Department of Education. Through this new law, we said we can and will take control of our own education affairs. While the suspension of Head Start is a black eye to this effort, we know that achieving what is good brings with it obstacles and challenges. This is what our elders taught us and what we tell our children today. We will be tested, and that there are times when we must admit our weaknesses so that we can flourish. We will overcome this challenge, but will only make progress if we learn from it and apply those lessons to all our education programs.

The Education Committee met first on Wednesday, May 3, 2006, the day after the summary suspension notice was received. At that meeting the Committee questioned Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr. regarding how this situation had arisen and how it would be addressed. At that meeting, there was no final answer to these important questions. The final answers may not be easy or comfortable, but if we do not address them our programs cannot succeed. The Committee will continue to pursue these questions in our roles as leaders overseeing the education of our children.

The Committee also met on Monday, May 8, 2006, and heard from Navajo Nation Vice President Frank Dayish, Jr., as the President was on travel to Washington, DC to meet with Head Start officials. While the Committee was glad to hear that the President was traveling to Washington with 13 other individuals to meet on this matter, it is unfortunate that the Navajo Nation must incur so much additional cost to fix a problem that should have been recognized and fixed long ago.

Finally, the Committee met on Tuesday, May 9, 2006, to receive testimony from President Shirley, the Navajo Nation Department of Education and the Navajo Nation Department of Justice regarding the meetings in Washington. Based on those meetings, we are optimistic that parts of the suspension will be lifted shortly and that the whole suspension could be lifted before regular Head Start classes begin in the Fall. The Committee will be holding more meetings on the Navajo Nation Head Start Program.

I want to take this opportunity to encourage Head Start families and employees to give us your thoughts, both positive and critical about the program. We want to preserve the Program's many good characteristics, but quickly correct the Program's failures.

The Education Committee has been approached by many Head Start parents who are concerned about the program and, most of all, about their little ones. The Committee understand and respects their concerns.

Navajo Head Start has many great, long-time employees. The reported criminal records of some employees should not give a black eye to all Head Start employees. Head Start employees who are not the subject to this concern should remain to be listened to and honored as they have taken care of our children. I urge you to stick with Navajo Head Start as it goes through this challenging time. The outcome will be a better and stronger Head Start Program.

Head Start should provide a place that is nourishing and safe for our little ones. The suspension of the Navajo Head Start program is a serious matter and the Education Committee is taking it seriously. There is nothing more precious than our children. The Committee will not back down in its efforts to ensure that this program is not only restored, but achieves excellence.

Sincerely,

Wallace Charley, Vice Chairman
Education Committee of the Navajo Nation Council