News Release
For Release: June 9, 2014

Navajo Head Start Passes Federal Review; Full Compliance Ensures Nation Will Receive an Estimated $125 Million 5-Year Grant Award

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Navajo Nation Head Start on Friday received official notice from the Administration for Children and Families – Office of Head Start it was deemed in full compliance with strict federal mandates and will now be the recipient of a five-year non-competitive grant award estimated at $125 million.

After more than 20 years of non-compliance, NHS successfully passed the comprehensive Federal Tribal Designated Renewal System. The notice came forth after a federal review team monitored the NHS and examined its management systems, policies and observed classroom instruction and health and safety compliance. From May 5-9, the federal review team visited 50 head start centers at random to make their assessments.

“The Navajo Nation was on the verge of losing Head Start after years of noncompliance,” said Assistant Superintendent Sharon Henderson-Singer. “There was a major need of reform to bring the Head Start program into compliance.”

Singer said the reform effort was a true collaboration between the NHS leadership team, staff, the Navajo Nation Council’s Health, Education and Human Services Committee, the Navajo Board of Education and the NHS parent policy council.

“I am grateful for staff and leaders who realized that higher standards and higher expectations needed to be set so that Navajo children and their families would receive learning experiences that would benefit them for a lifetime,” Singer said.

“We are moving forward to providing high quality early childhood programs for our Nation’s youngest children,” she said. “We now have a high quality workforce, highly stimulating, literacy rich learning environments, improved technology services, safe and healthy facilities, aligned curriculum to the common core standard, promotion of Navajo language and culture in the classroom, benchmark assessments and improved teaching.
“I am hopeful that the naysayers have gained an understanding of what is needed to ensure the NHS grant is not terminated and children are provided the best services possible,” Singer said.

Throughout the whole process, Singer said she was keenly aware that if NHS did not comply with federal mandates that not only would the children suffer, all NHS staff – administrators, teachers, cooks and bus drivers – would lose their jobs.

“The process of rebuilding the program was met with resistance by the public and leadership at times. Nevertheless, staff had to persevere and work through those challenges,” Singer said.

All Head Start programs, including the Navajo Nation’s, must meet more than 2,800 federal requirements including the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, which established a Sept. 30, 2013 deadline requiring all Head Start agencies to employ a highly qualified workforce.

For NHS, a highly qualified workforce meant that anyone who works with children must have at minimum a Child Development Associate credential. Teachers must have an associate’s degree, and be enrolled in a major with coursework related to early childhood education. Teacher assistants, and cooks are required to have a minimum of 24 credit hours towards an associate degree, and be enrolled in a program leading to an associate or baccalaureate degree.

“There is an ongoing effort within the NHS to make sure that staff entrusted with a Navajo child’s development and wellbeing are well qualified and are committed to their growth,” Singer said.

“There is still much work to be done to improve NHS services and open more centers,” Singer said. “The NHS must continue to build upon the progress made over the last two years to bring the program into compliance. Termination of the NHS grant for any reason is not an option.”

###