



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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## President Shelly signs MOA between DODE-GMCS District



President Shelly is joined by school board members, tribal officials, one state rep., and employees of the Gallup McKinley County School District for the signing of the historic MOA to teach Navajo language and culture. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.— In an action designed to preserve Navajo language and culture, President Shelly signed a memorandum of agreement between Gallup McKinley County Schools and the Department of Dine’ Education on April 20.

The stateroom was packed on Mon. morning, as school board members, tribal officials and representatives from GMCS met for the signing at the Office of the President and Vice President.

President Shelly said Title 10 of the Navajo Nation Code mandates that a model be created for how Navajo kids will be taught tradition language and culture. He noted that Vice President Rex Lee Jim has been working on this with DODE during the administration.

“This is a special day for our Navajo children. Dine’

bizaad is an essential element of life, culture and identity,” President Shelly said.

He expressed deep appreciation for the effort, especially since Thoreau went through challenging times when seven kids in the community committed suicide a few years ago.

“All these experts came in. The conclusion was that the kids didn’t know who they were. They didn’t know who their family and relatives were,” President Shelly said.

The lack of self-identity, combined with alcoholism in the home and poverty, resulted in the spate of suicides that shocked the community.

“Navajos, for centuries, have survived on the clan system. Our language is powerful. I commend all who speak the language and I encourage those who

are learning to continue,” President Shelly said.

The MOA recognizes and preserves the Navajo language and the five Dine’ standards of language, culture, history, government and character building.

Frank Chiapetti, superintendent of GMCS, said he is a fifth generation Gallupian and has spent 49 years in the Gallup. During that time, he made a lot of friends with natives and became passionate about education and the Navajo language.

“We need to develop the language and culture for our young kids, even at the pre-school level,” Chiapetti said. “This MOA is a good start.”

He said several schools in the district are currently in different phases of construction, including Katherine Miller, Jefferson Elementary, Ramah Elementary, Del Norte and Lincoln-Thoreau Elementary.

N.M. Rep. Wanda Johnson said she speaks Navajo fluently.

“I wouldn’t be where I am today without my language and culture. I took my language and culture to the Roundhouse. I look forward to working with the school district on this MOA,” Johnson said.

Dr. Tommy Lewis, superintendent for DODE, said he participated in

amendments to the MOA that identified how the Navajo language would be incorporated in the curriculum daily.

“Children deserve a chance to learn their language and culture. At this time, the schools are the only outlet where we can expose the language to children,” Lewis said.

He noted that conventional wisdom dictates that the Navajo language be learned at home. However, many parents do not speak the language and not enough grandparents are encouraging use of the language daily.

“Through the Navajo Governance in Education Act, we are making a strong stance that language and culture must be implemented,” Lewis said. “Gallup McKinley County School District is doing this.

“This MOA will be a model,” he added.

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