



Navajo Nation
Department of Diné Education

CONTACTS:

Brent Nelson, Systems and Programming Manager
brentnelson@nndode.org

Cody Begaye, Senior Public Information Officer
(928)871-7493, codybegaye@nndode.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 25, 2021

NAVAJO DEPARTMENT OF DINÉ EDUCATION EMPHASIZES MOVING FORWARD WITH FIBER-OPTIC
BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE FOR THE NAVAJO NATION

Connection quality, price, and technology remain hurdles for tribal communities

The past year of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted a key issue that many families on the Navajo Nation face: a reliable broadband infrastructure for rural regions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has either greatly reduced or eliminated in-person learning for schools across the country. As a result, students rely on the internet to attend classes and complete their assignments. However, not every part of New Mexico has access to high-speed internet.

Without a stable connection to online learning, students will struggle to keep up with lesson plans, communicate with their teachers, and not finish their homework on time, often leading them to falling behind or being absent from learning for extended lengths of time.

Brent Nelson, Systems and Programming Manager for the Navajo Nation Department of Diné Education, highlighted the issue during a Feb. 17 roundtable discussion with the New Mexico Homework Gap Team. The discussion focused on how to close the digital divide for the one in four New Mexico students who lack access to high-speed internet.

“The pandemic has made daily life and distance learning nearly impossible for thousands of our school children and teachers, parents and grandparents. One of the biggest challenges that stands in our way is obtaining broadband services for those people,” Nelson said.

Nelson also indicated price and connection quality were hurdles that Native families face. Despite improvements in recent years, the Navajo Nation has faced these connection challenges for decades, which are even more pronounced in rural areas.

“Despite the fact that we are experiencing a historic public health crisis that has threatened the basic existence of our culture and our families, we are facing increased limitations to remain connected during mandatory quarantine periods,” Nelson said.

The Navajo Nation’s current goal with addressing the homework gap is providing teachers guidance on how to engage with their students so they can take ownership of their learning using technology.

“Right now, we see our teachers struggling using the available resources and learning platforms at their schools. This task is challenging because of the different learning platforms each school uses,” Nelson said. “Then for students, the connection issues are the main reason for absentee issues in their classes. We provide devices [including Chromebooks and iPads] to our students, but it doesn’t solve that

connectivity problem. A Broadband infrastructure is really needed across the state, especially in tribal communities.”

The roundtable was hosted by Sen. Ben Ray Luján, D-N.M., who said he was advocating that a part of the U.S. Senate’s \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package includes funding for closing the broadband gap.

Sen. Luján told the roundtable he believes that entities should look at building and expanding services when they receive federal funds. Any funding that is unused will have to be returned.

“I firmly believe that when we look at internet connectivity in America it needs to be looked at the same way that the highway system was once looked at,” Sen. Luján said. “When people said, ‘oh, we can’t build roads to communities where nobody lives or there’s very few people who live there.’ Well, if you don’t connect to the country, it turns out that you can’t get from one big city to the next. You have to go to those small, rural towns and small communities to get there. That’s why we had to have this interstate system built in America.”

Despite the challenges before them, Gar Clarke, Geospatial Program Manager for the New Mexico Department of Information Technology, said he is proud of the team that has been assembled to deal with closing the homework gap.

“This is a select group of people that best represents tribes [of New Mexico], with digital equity advocates from tribes, agencies across the state,” Clarke said.

“I’m grateful for the efforts of the Homework Gap Team, whose members are educators as well as state and national experts on broadband connectivity. I look forward to continuing to work with them as a member of the Senate Commerce Committee, and to lifting up their insights as the Senate puts forth the upcoming COVID-19 relief package,” Sen. Luján said.

About the New Mexico Homework Gap Team

The New Mexico Homework Gap Team is a collective action initiative focused on providing hotspots and devices to homebound students and led by New Mexico Public Education Department (PED) NM Indian Affairs Department (IAD), Public Schools Facility Authority (PSFA), Department of Information Technology (DoIT), Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) and State Library, Santa Fe Indian School (SFIS), Navajo Nation, Community Advocacy, Community Learning Network (CLN), and more.

For more information, visit <https://www.communitylearningnetwork.org/homework-gap-team.html>