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October 20, 2021

Department of Diné Education welcomes New Mexico Secretary of Education Designate

Discussions cover education-related challenges across the Navajo Nation



New Mexico Secretary of Education Designate Kurt Steinhaus, middle row second from left, and Assistant Secretary Lashawna Tso, second row far left, were welcomed to the Navajo Education Center on Oct. 18. Acting Superintendent Patricia Gonnig, front row left, and DODE Program Managers shared their initiatives and challenges facing Navajo education and how they want to work with NMPED to overcome them. Photo by DODE

The Navajo Nation Department of Diné Education (DODE) welcomed New Mexico Public Education (NMPED) Secretary Designate Kurt Steinhaus and Assistant Secretary Lashawna Tso to the Navajo Education Center on Oct. 18.

The Secretary traveled to Window Rock to meet with the Navajo Nation President before traveling to the Navajo Education Center, where he met Acting Superintendent Patricia Gonnig, members from the Navajo Nation Board of Education (NNBOE), and Department Program Managers.

"When it comes to achieving our goals, the more, the merrier. We are looking forward to having an ongoing working relationship with NMPED to meet these challenges," Superintendent Gonnig said.

The Department detailed challenges facing education on the Navajo Nation to the Secretary, as well as what the Department has accomplished during the past year with the COVID-19 pandemic. Program Managers shared their program's initiatives, accomplishments, and goals with the Secretary.

The Superintendent detailed several key issues facing Tribal schools to the Secretary, including funding and the usage by schools; the discrepancies with resources between schools in metropolitan against rural settings; adhering to the Department's Navajo Nation School Reopening Plan to keep schools open for students and faculty; and the need to strengthen Tribal Consultation.

"We have the personnel; we have the expertise here. But now we have to ask, what can we do more [to address the challenges]? What should we be thinking about well in advance? What do we do to preserve our customs and language? We need to think about those investments," Superintendent Gonnie said.

Board President Priscilla Benally cited the need for language preservation for students.

"Our language is very sacred to us; we don't want to lose it," Benally said.

The Board President also emphasized the need for enhanced Tribal Consultation, and that it falls to each Department or group to become involved in those discussions.

Board members shared one other obstacle with the Secretary that they faced with the previous Secretary's cabinet. While NMPED had an Indian Education Committee and members who served on it, the Board felt those members carried no weight or had no voice in the department's functions.

The Secretary acknowledged the difficulties that faced the previous Cabinet and urged the cooperation with DODE and the Board to provide a voice for Native education within NMPED.

"I don't like when things are placed just to fill a checklist, so let's join together to make that a reality," Secretary Steinhaus said.

The Secretary shared his idea for a collaboration where DODE could assist: improvements to advanced courses provided by ACT and the College Board as well as the state's own curriculum.

"We want to invite them to come to New Mexico, the Navajo Nation, and then consult with them to design an AP class that's about Native language, culture, history, preservation. We want to help preserve the language, and we need your help to update our state's social study standards, which have not changed in about 19 years. It's time to update them so the language, culture, and history can be in schools for all the kids," Secretary Steinhaus said.

Staff from DODE and NMPED agree it is time to collaborate to overcome the challenges facing both groups and enhance education for students across the region.

"These are challenging times but I'm glad to have good cabinet staff to support our work. Let's do some wonderful things for our children," Superintendent Gonnie said.

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