



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 18, 2018

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Navajo Nation Council approves emergency funding for Navajo Head Start

WINDOW ROCK – On Tuesday during the 2018 Summer Council Session, members of the 23rd Navajo Nation Council deliberated over emergency Legislation No. 0259-18, sponsored by Council Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels), who has been working closely with the Department of Diné Education regarding challenges with Head Start grant funding.

The legislation seeks to allocate approximately \$6.3 million from the Unreserved, Undesignated Fund Balance to the Department of Diné Education's Navajo Head Start program to continue daily operations and direct services to the 2,105 funded student slots under Head Start and Early Head Start Programs.

Delegate Hale said that Navajo Head Start is actively recruiting for the upcoming school year, and the proposed allocation ensures that all enrolled eligible Navajo children would be provided continued educational services. He added that the funding is needed to cover personnel expenses, salaries, fringe benefits, employee-related expenses for mandatory insurance coverage, and worker's compensation.

"I have been working with the program and the administration to see how we could keep Head Start in operation. We understand that 80-percent of the funding is going towards salaries and personnel expenses, but they are the people working at the program every day and working with our children," said Delegate Hale.

Delegate Hale explained that the personnel funding would go towards the continuation of employment for Head Start teachers, teacher aides, bus drivers, cooks, and other critical staff that ensure the schools remain open for students.

According to the Department of Diné Education, which is under the Executive Branch, Navajo Head Start submitted a grant application to the Office of Head Start for the period of March 1, 2018 to February 28, 2019, which would be the fourth year of the five-year grant. However, in fall 2017 the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services sought to reduce the Navajo Head Start budget from \$23 million to \$15.7 million due to under-enrollment, without providing the Nation due process or the option to appeal.

In March, the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia ruled that the federal government must fund Navajo Head Start at the original \$23 million and to provide the Navajo Nation its right to notice, appeal, and a hearing before the federal government may attempt to reduce any grant funding.

After the ruling by the federal court was made, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued a letter to the Navajo Nation stating that the funding would be reinstated, but then rescinded the funding in June stating that the department had finally created an appeal process and directed the Nation to submit their appeal within 30-days.

Council Delegate Otto Tso (Tó Nanees Dizí) urged his colleagues to vote in favor of the legislation stating that most current Navajo leadership and their families went to Head Start, and the school served a vital step to preparing them for the k-12 school system.

“We need to support our children. They will be better prepared for school when they start and they learn to communicate with one another. We need to fund head start because right now it is a direct investment in our children,” said Delegate Tso. “It is like sending your child to college and getting the kids through school, this is the start of our young ones school life.”

Council Delegate Walter Phelps (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Tsidi Tó’ii) recommended an amendment to the legislation that would stipulate that the funding allocation may be used as matching funds to the federal grant and could extend beyond FY2018, meaning the supplemental funding would not lapse until Navajo Head Start has utilized the entire appropriation.

Council members voted 19-0 to approve the amendment.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the Navajo Nation Council voted 17-2 to approve Legislation No. 0259-18 with two amendments. The President will have 10 calendar days to consider the resolution once it is delivered to the Office of the President and Vice President.

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