

Education Amendments to Navajo Nation Education Code Launches a New Navajo Department of Education

Window Rock, Arizona – In January 2005, the Navajo Nation Council tabled what would have been the first sweeping amendments to the Navajo Nation's 21-year old education code, also called Title 10, which is one of 26 codes of the Navajo Nation government.

After a four-hour reading of the proposed amendments and after some question and discussion, the Council tabled the legislation, directing the sponsors of the legislation to “regroup” and meet with local school board members and parents.

“We were undeterred,” said Leland Leonard, Executive Director of the Navajo Nation's Education Division, recalling the tabling. “The decision to table the proposed amendments for six months did change some of our plans, but at the same time, we were more committed than ever before to get it passed. Almost immediately, we assemble a team and re-launched our public education campaign, with a concerted effort on reaching local parents and school board members.”

Back in January when the legislation was tabled, the Education Committee was disappointed but remained confident. The Education Committee played a key role in preparing for going back to the Summer Session in July.

Aside from a myriad number of meetings during the week and on many a weekend, the Division of Education and the Education Committee launched a series of radio talk-shows on the widely-listened to KTNN radio. The two-hour forum featured call-ins from listeners in the second hour.

“Inspiring to say the least”, said Mr. Leonard on the call-ins. “It was good to hear from the Navajo people. I recall, in particular, a call from a Navajo mother from the western portion of our reservation. She applauded our efforts, and holding back tears, she thanked us on behalf of her children.”

Another caller, who said she was calling from the top of a mountain range, said, “Go for it!”

Six months later, the Division and the Education Committee of the Navajo Nation Council, returned to the full council, confident that it had fulfilled its directive to meet with parents and school board members.

“We needed at least 59 votes, or two-thirds of the full council membership, and we got it! We got exactly 59 votes,” said Leonard. The 88-member Navajo Nation Council represents 110 Chapters, or local governing units, on the Navajo Nation. Elected members to the Council are called Council Delegates; they serve four-year terms.

Some of the major amendments passed included the establishment of a Navajo Nation Board of Education, the appointment of a Navajo Nation Superintendent of Schools, and the establishment of a state-like Department of Education, which would serve all schools on the Navajo Nation.

The membership of the Board of Education will be composed of 11 members: 6 appointed by the President of the Navajo Nation; and 5 elected by Navajo voters. Owing to the off-election year, the 5

elected members will not begin until after the November 2006 tribal election. Until then, the Presidential appointees will constitute the board.

Mary Helen Creamer, Program Director of the Tribal Education Department planning office, said, "The goal to have an education regulatory agency—a Navajo Department of Education—has been over twenty years in the making. Past administrations all the way back into the early 70s have had this goal," she explains. "We were extremely pleased to have the full support and backing of past Navajo Nation leaders."

Former Chairman and Presidents of the Navajo Nation, Dr. Peterson Zah and Mr. Milton Bluehouse, Jr., lobbied Navajo Nation Council Delegates to pass the amendments.

Dr. Zah, who serves as an Advisor to the President of Arizona State University, was instrumental in the 1980s in getting the original Title 10, Navajo Education Code, passed. At a work session with the Navajo Nation Council in July, he told Delegates, "It's time. The words of our great Navajo leader, Chief Manuelito, are truer today than they have ever been: education is the ladder. The Navajo Nation is responsible for making sure that all our children get the best education possible. It's not about politics; it's about our grandchildren," he told them. "Where will they be in ten years, or twenty years from now? Ask yourself that question when making your decision."

After some question and discussion, a motion was made to caucus. It was hoped that each caucus would reach consensus and then offer agreed-upon amendments in the afternoon once the full council reconvened. Yet round after round of recommended amendments from each of the five caucuses failed.

"There was an attempt to table the legislation again," recalled Leonard. "That failing, the only remaining course of action was clear: vote on the amendments."

The Speaker of the Council, Lawrence Morgan, directed the Delegates to vote.

"Vote green! Red!" was heard on the floor. Moments passed. To the side sat Dr. Zah, Mr. Bluehouse, and in the gallery, a gathering of Division of Education staff, school board members, parents, and school administrators, all looking up at the board where the votes are tallied and displayed.

"Staff, lock in the votes," said the Speaker, just as two blinking red buttons changed to affirmative green.

The screen lit up the result.

"59. Passed." The educate staff, parents, students all the those supporters of the amendments applauded, screamed, and yell wit a English of relief!!

Dr. Zah told friends and supporters outside the Council Chambers "Now the hard work starts in planning with local state and federal officials."