

School board thanks legislators for impact aid support

Written by Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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The Gallup McKinley County Schools Board of Education thanked state legislators who supported GMCS and their students throughout the school year at the board's May 20 meeting.

The board was most pleased with the help during the debates over state impact aid during the New Mexico legislature's regular session in March.

"This was a fight of all fights this year," GMCS Superintendent Mike Hyatt said. "When [the Legislature] was bringing up impact aid, it was going to be a battle."

Impact aid is a federal funding source for rural schools that exist mostly on tax exempt land, such as tribal lands. Schools in cities like Albuquerque receive more tax support from the city, but schools in areas like Gallup and Zuni don't receive as much tax support due to their locations.

Rural districts like GMCS thus rely more on impact aid than urban districts. For several decades, New Mexico has made it so the state can effectively take up to 25 percent of a district's impact aid and redistribute that funding to other schools.

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When Senate Bill 170 was introduced during the legislative session, its intent was to keep the state from taking away any of the impact aid that rural school districts receive.

Hyatt said the district is extremely grateful to the legislators who sided with GMCS on the matter, and said the board wanted to recognize them for their efforts, specifically the two who sponsored SB 170 in March.

One of those recognized was Sen. George Munoz, D-Gallup, who said the most valuable lesson from the past legislative session is that what GMCS lacks in comparison to other school districts is the money given by the state.

The possibility of legal action against the state remains if rural districts continue to receive less aid than urban districts, and it's something GMCS should be ready for, Munoz said.

"If the governor doesn't get [the aid support] together, then we need to be prepared to file that lawsuit," he said. "As with the Yazzie-Martinez case, and impact aid, it seems the only way we win in this district is through the court system."

The amount of impact aid given to smaller districts in New Mexico looks even smaller when compared to districts that receive impact aid in neighboring states like Arizona and Utah, Munoz added.

"It's to the point where New Mexico needs to wake up," he said.

Also recognized was Sen. Clemente Sanchez, D-Grants.

Sanchez said that it was a tough, but important fight in the legislation in order to get money for their students.

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“We have a long way to go to make it equitable for students across the state,” he said. “We’re going to find a way to do that.”

According to Sanchez, the district was able to get \$34 million in capital outlay from the state. From this total, the district got \$10 million for teacherages, accommodations provided for a teacher by a school, and to pay down the debt of existing teacherages, Sanchez said. This was in addition to another \$24 million from the governor’s office.

Despite the collaborative effort from district officials, other state school superintendents, and even the President of the Navajo Nation to receive these funds, Sanchez said the amount of aid given by the state is just the beginning of a new battle.

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