

Holding New Mexico accountable for quality education

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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Group presents follow up to landmark 2018 case

Public education in New Mexico was under the microscope when parents and elected officials gathered at the Gallup-McKinley County Schools Student Support Services boardroom Jan. 15 at a forum organized by Transform Education N.M.

Transform Education N.M. is a coalition of education, tribal and community leaders with the goal of advancing a new vision for the state's public education system and holding the state accountable to fulfill the constitutional rights of its students.

CASE BACKGROUND

The central topic was the outcome the *Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico* lawsuit filed in 2017, which is based on the legal claim that the State of New Mexico, the New Mexico Public Education Department, and the Secretary of Education violated the State Constitution by failing to provide a uniform system of free public schools sufficient for all students' success.

Judge Sarah Singleton ruled in favor of the plaintiffs in July 2018. She said the state is violating the rights of public school students to the resources, funding, and programming that will enable them to succeed. She said the education system was especially lacking in the cases of children from low-income households, students of color, English Language Learners, and students with disabilities. Singleton ordered the state to make an overhaul to its public education system immediately.

The plaintiffs believe the 2019 New Mexico Legislature did not take enough action to comply with the judge's orders and did not provide programming and support for at-risk students. Bilingual education and social services were not in place. Further, a number of state districts dropped reading intervention and truancy-prevention programs.

THE RULING DISCUSSION

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Gallup-McKinley County Chamber of Commerce CEO Bill Lee welcomed guests to the discussion and spoke about the chamber's involvement with public education.

"I'm proud to say I am a product of the Gallup-McKinley County Schools," Lee said. "I wouldn't be where I am today without the education I got here."

Lee said the chamber is a strong advocate on several fronts including impact aid and the lawsuit ruling.

"I know we are a strong community who believes in fighting for what's right, especially when it comes to the education of our children," Lee said.

With the second session of the 54th New Mexico Legislature days away, Lee urged attendees to speak with their legislative representatives about public education issues.

"They have a lot of extra money. There is no reason in my mind that things like this, that have been mandated by the courts, should not be funded and implemented to their fullest extent," Lee said.

Wilhelmina Yazzie, one of the main plaintiffs in the Yazzie/Martinez lawsuit, spoke about the importance of pressing the case.

"It's for our children, for all the children [across the state]," Yazzie said, explaining why she joined the lawsuit.

Yazzie also spoke about how children are sacred in the Navajo culture, sharing the story of how a baby is connected to the Holy People from birth and they become human when they have their first laugh, which is when the family of the baby has a celebration.

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“As they get older, it is our responsibility as parents, teachers, lawmakers, to prepare them for life,” Yazzie said. “Our children deserve a quality education, and the state is responsible for providing a good education for all of their students.”

Gail Evans, lead counsel for the Yazzie plaintiffs, gave more details about the case.

“The case has had a special focus on Native American children,” Evans said. “There has been no other case like this across the country that has focused on Native students.”

The ruling of the case speaks to the rights of Native American students, she added.

“We have to know what we’re holding the state to,” Evans said. “It’s one thing to say they need to comply, but how do they get that done?”

To that end, Evans spoke about the legislative platform they plan to use for the upcoming session to guide the state to come into compliance with the lawsuit ruling:

Develop a capacity of educators, a pipeline of bi-lingual and TESOL-endorsed (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) teachers, Native language instructors, pre-K teachers and special ed teachers, and professional development in cultural and linguistic education.

Provide literacy specialists and social services.

Offer full day pre-K for 4-year-olds.

Create availability of instructional materials and technology, including wifi on tribal lands

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Create flexible extended learning programs

Offer educator salary increases

Make funding formula changes, increasing the index for at-risk, bilingual, special ed, and small district funds.

Develop a capacity of the Public Education Department to assist districts.

Develop culturally and linguistically responsive curriculum for institutions of higher education and other centers.

Evans said the biggest takeaway for the public is this will not be a quick fix, but one that will require focus and cooperation.

“It’s not going to be enough to just add some money to the public school budget,” Evans said. “It’s going to take a massive statewide effort.”

By Cody Begaye
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