

Learning the language

Written by By: Molly Adamson Sun Correspondent
Friday, 25 June 2021 05:41

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GMCS brings in new curriculum to promote Navajo fluency

Fluency in the native Navajo language is decreasing with every decade. Ophelia Sanchez, the head of Gallup McKinley County Schools Cultural Education Department told the Board at its June 14 meeting that proficiency in the language is declining.

Sanchez shared that in 1980, 93 percent of the Navajo population was fluent, but now only 170,000 Americans know how to speak the language.

GMCS is taking action to turn the tide.

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum/Instruction Gerald Horacek, and Assistant Superintendent of Student Services Paulette White, presented an update about the new Navajo language curriculum the district will begin implementing over the next school year.

Horacek began his part of the presentation by going over how the district teaches the standards students are required to meet. He reminded the board that about four years ago the district brought in a focus group of teachers to help create pacing guides and help the district determine what they should look like and what things should be included.

The district used that feedback to create consistent guides for different subjects.

They created the English/Language Arts and math guides in 2017. They built the science, social studies, physical education, health, and visual art guides in 2018. In 2019 they focused on music and employability skills.

Horacek explained that the district has been trying to incorporate the cultural/educational impact of the Navajo culture into lessons for each subject.

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One way in which the district is trying to improve Navajo language skills is by adopting a program called Stride.

Horacek said the Stride program is working with the National Indian Education Association to create a Navajo culture and language class for fourth graders. He said it usually takes Stride about a year to create a course like this one, but they're expected to have the one for GMCS done by Sept. 1.

Horacek explained that the district does not have many teachers who are qualified to teach the Navajo class. He said the program might find a teacher from Crownpoint Elementary, for example, to offer the class to students in the district, such as those attending Lincoln or Navajo Elementary.

Stride is currently working on a voice piece for the program that will be able to recognize the Navajo language. The goal is to eventually have the program teach all grades K-12 in the district.

Sanchez talked about the importance of setting and meeting the learning standards for the language portion of the curriculum.

"If our curriculum doesn't begin with the standard focus then we are not preparing our students to speak the Navajo language," she said. "Our students cannot even speak a single sentence."

She pointed out that most fluent Navajo speakers are now all over the age of 40. She explained that part of that comes from a failure in the district's curriculum because currently students are only taught the same Navajo language lessons over and over throughout their GMCS careers.

Sanchez informed the board that one of the goals for the new curriculum would eventually have the students learn enough of the language so they could speak it every day.

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She said a lot of parents have told her, ‘I want that bilingual seal on my child’s diploma. What are you going to do differently? How are we going to impact this language?’

Sanchez told the board that part of the reason students don’t get that seal is that they don’t have simple language skills.

“Students do not pass our bilingual seal diploma because they can’t move over the simple skills of just introducing themselves, recall, memorization, and simple basic verbs and commands,” Sanchez said. “They can’t answer questions. They can’t hold a conversation.

“They can’t explain the culture and tradition that we live by in the Native language,” she continued.

Sanchez went over the new program’s grade-level language objectives. The goal of these objectives is to have students growing and building upon their schema. Each objective is age and grade appropriate.

Sanchez presented some of the goals that will be put in place for fourth, fifth, and sixth graders.

Fourth graders will be expected to be able to recite a cultural teaching of the Earth, using terms that refer to specific family members, explain why the Earth and water are important to their lives, and be able to gather sacred stories on birds.

Building upon the skills they learned in fourth grade, fifth graders will be expected to be able to recite a cultural teaching of the sky, explain their connections with other family members, explain why fire and air are important in their lives, and gather sacred stories on insects.

Sixth graders will be able to retell their cultural teachings of the Earth and sky, express

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appropriate kinship terms, listen and retell stories related to elements of nature, and be able to retell the sacred stories of birds and insects.

With these objectives in mind, Sanchez explained that some of the Navajo teachers may not have the skills needed to teach these objectives. She discussed training options and noted that the district is currently listing many positions for Navajo teachers.

She summarized the new curriculum by explaining that it's all about getting the students to become fluent in the language.

"We don't want our students or our children to lose the language, so our work begins now," she concluded.

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