

Boarding school history underpins Yazzie Martinez findings on Native education

Written by By Shaun Griswold nmindepth.com
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Part Two: A way forward

The Yazzie/Martinez decision has brought into sharp focus a long simmering debate about how best to educate Native American children.

New Mexico has passed laws since the 1970s intent on providing culturally relevant education and language programs to Native children, most notably the Bilingual Multicultural Education Act of 1973, and the Indian Education Act of 2003. It's these laws that [late New Mexico Judge Sarah] Singleton pointed to as an existing state blueprint for adequate education, if only they were followed.

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The decision described as ideal an educational framework that draws on decades of Native scholarship about the needs of Indigenous students: a culturally relevant curriculum that centers the knowledge, perspectives, and lived realities of a student's ethnic or racial group; Native language instruction; recruitment of Native educators and a collaborative relationship between state and tribal governments.

Native leaders would go a step further, urging that tribes be empowered to control the education of Native students.

"...there is still the need for that change of mind, and that is to give deference to the Indian leaders," Regis Pecos [former governor of Cochiti Pueblo and co-director of the Santa Fe Leadership Institute at the Santa Fe Indian School] said, "... who have built their own programs and systems based on what they know to be in their best interest of their children and their people."

Models for successful Native-led education exist, Pecos said, like the Keres Children's Learning Center, which teaches traditional language courses to kids in Cochiti Pueblo; college readiness programs for Native Americans such as the Summer Policy Institute; and K-12 schools such as the Santa Fe Indian School, which under Pueblo leadership was established when the Albuquerque Indian School was closed in the 1980s.

"These are all Indigenous knowledge-based programs, not built by the universities, but built by our own Native faculty," Pecos said.

The Tribal Remedy Framework has been offered up by Native American leaders and endorsed by tribes as a blueprint on how to move the state into compliance with the Yazzie/Martinez court order. The blueprint calls for increased tribal control and consultation over education, community-based education created by tribal communities, commitment to culturally relevant and Native language education, and development of a Native teacher pipeline. And it calls for permanent, year-over-year funding for Native students, language programs, and tribal education.

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Native leaders say the framework is a long-overdue comprehensive approach, but so far, state leaders continue a practice of piecemeal reform, at most.

At the advent of Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham's administration, the Legislature in 2019 took up how to respond to the Yazzie/Martinez court order that the state rectify the poor education provided to so many of its kids. Lawmakers pumped enormous amounts of new funds into education. But gave short shrift to legislation that would shift resources to Native-led education.

Then, just a year later, in March 2020 just as the COVID-19 pandemic roared to life, the state unsuccessfully petitioned the court to agree the problem had been remedied, a move roundly condemned by the plaintiffs in the case, who say there's still a long way to go.

The change of mind Pecos and others speak of — echoing language from the Meriam Report of 1928 — is made more likely when powerful people show proper respect to the country's history, starting with investigating boarding schools and their legacy in tribal communities. That pushes those stories into the public's consciousness. Like [Interior Secretary Deb] Haaland's high-profile initiative to identify isolated and forgotten burial grounds for children, which has already spurred the City of Albuquerque to action.

In the wake of renewed scrutiny of the 4-H park, Albuquerque's volunteer Commission on American Indian and Alaska Native Affairs, launched an investigation into the history of the park and what should be done today to care for the burial ground.

City officials are reaching out to tribal communities to gather their input and make recommendations.

While the gravesite was discovered in the course of building the park, its existence wasn't a secret.

When the "Albuquerque Journal" reported a baby's skull had been found during construction of the park, an area resident, Rudy Martinez, told the Journal he'd found bones there when he was a kid in the early 1950s. The newspaper ran a large photograph of Martinez examining bones.

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And Ed Tsyitee told the Journal he'd been the caretaker for the cemetery for thirty years, until he retired in 1964. Tsyitee, a member of Zuni Pueblo who lived in Albuquerque, said the burials would have been made because "there was no way to take them home in those days." Most would have been students, he believed, buried in military style clothing.

The newspaper later reported plans of the Albuquerque Indian School to put a fence around the burial ground.

Why that didn't occur is unknown. A plaque was laid in the ground instead.

Now that plaque is missing. A separate marker at a nearby public art sculpture, laid in 1995, and tapestries hung in a tree are the only evidence of a little-known burial ground.

Commissioner Lorenzo Jim (Diné/Navajo) would like to see a designation for the site that could potentially limit access to honor its history. Jim said at a commission meeting on July 16 that the task requires care. "It's a piece of land, and again, involving our children, so making it sacred is important."

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