

## Not to be taken for GRANTed

Written by Story and photos by Andy Gibbons III Sun Correspondent  
Friday, 29 July 2016 04:04

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### Navajo Nation education grant partially passed to help special education school

Have you ever wondered what happens to the students with the most severe of disabilities who have needs too great for the staffing and resources of the smaller school districts surrounding Gallup? Where can they go to receive an education and learn applicable skills for daily life?

The answer is just on the other side of the Arizona border at the St. Michaels Association for Special Education.

SMASE's program for students with special needs has been in operation for over 40 years on the Navajo Nation, with no direct support from the tribe. That is, until this year, when a grant was officially requested to help with needs that range from fixing roads and water lines to funds to hire teachers and buy curriculum.

The grant was supported by the Health Education and Human Services Committee of the Navajo Nation Tribal Council and managed by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services. Jonathan Hale, council delegate for Oak/Pine Springs Chapter and St. Michaels Chapter, sponsored the grant.

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“The grant was well supported by the Navajo Nation, the Navajo Nation Council, that is, it also had supporting resolutions from area chapters and the general public,” Hale said in an interview with the Sun.

After much support, the grant finally made it to the desk of Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye for the needed funds of \$2,418,660. The president used his executive power of line-item veto to cut out 74 percent of the requested funds to help Navajo Nation children with special needs.

### **Why was the grant vetoed?**

The Gallup Sun reached out to the Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice President for comment on this developing story a week in advance. As of press time, a response has not been received.

Several reasons were given by the president’s office as to why a majority of the grant was vetoed. The overall explanation was that the particular undesignated unreserved fund was only for Navajo Nation government programs.

### **Councilman Hale disagreed.**

“Past councils made appropriations to other entities,” he said. “I was saddened by that remark, as it was an ill-advised statement to submit to say no to those employees that have the heart to take care of children that have disabilities.”

After the initial disappointment, the leadership at SMASE has been very grateful for the \$629,472 that was passed. For a staff who will take all the help they can get, approximately a quarter of the original grant was nothing to look down on.

### **Where will the funds go?**

The association's education director, James Conner, said the grant would fund two new yellow buses and two shuttle vans, both with wheelchair access; mileage reimbursement for transporting students; some curriculum materials and programs; general materials and supplies; some technology; and the hiring of two contract therapists.

"These are all required services and equipment needed to comply with the student educational plans (IEP)," Conner wrote in an email to the Sun. "Our Transportation fleet is in dire need of new vehicles. Hundreds of thousands of miles are traveled every year for student transport. We cover most of the Navajo Nation and try to get students back to their families as often as possible."

There were some conflicts with parts of the grant that were passed and parts that were vetoed. For instance, the online instructional programs for the curriculum were passed, but the school doesn't have the technology to use it.

"The veto eliminated the purchase of new computers that are compatible with online programs," Conner said. "Our classroom technology for students is outdated. We are currently trying to resolve this issue with the grant."

### **Looking toward the future**

While the grant is still a work in progress, the staff is already gearing up for another school year. Some of the association's nurses, teachers, and therapists are actually volunteers through Mercy Corps who have specialized college degrees and are fully licensed to work. These volunteers do not receive a salary.

Rebecca Lane, who is one of the volunteers from last school year, has been hired on as the association's autistic support teacher.

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"I serve the students with severe and profound autism," Lane said. "My favorite part about working at SMASE is the students. I get the students that other school districts are unable to work with, and I get to see the amazing progress they make in a year. All of my students have improved significantly."

Lane is excited that the grant will provide her classroom with a new printer. This will help with paperwork, but more importantly, instead of going across campus to print something out, staff will be free to give students much-needed attention.

Lane will not be receiving any other technology, resources, or sensory materials that could have fostered specialized learning for students with autism. Regardless, she wants to stay optimistic.

Lane was told that one student was beyond helping and couldn't even sit and listen.

"One of my students with the worst behaviors ... has become my best listener and role model for the other students," she said after working with this student for over a year. "It is a beautifully rewarding job."

Conner, Lane, and others at SMASE have consistently expressed their gratitude for the portions of the grant that were not vetoed. Many are glad for the Navajo Nation's first step in supporting these students.

Councilman Hale is still working with the association's board members to see if there will be any more future allocation from the NN.

"Often times, people don't understand them and ignore them," Hale said of the students at SMASE and the nature of their needs. "They are gifts from God like we all are, and they shouldn't be ignored or shunned due to their situations. They are people, too. Now how do we move forward to help them in our social environment with facilities and basic human needs is another consideration that needs governmental attention."

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