

Office of Head Start Tribal Consultation
2022 Navajo Head Start Written Testimony
April 18, 2022

Navajo Head Start (NHS) is a large educational program for the youngest scholars aged 0-5 years old and many families throughout the Navajo Nation. This super-grantee is federally funded to provide comprehensive educational services to 1350 children and their families in sixty-three (63) Chapter communities. NHS employs over 300 staff and strives to support a strong start and foundation for children on the Navajo Nation to excel academically. Teachers, paraprofessionals, and bus drivers work together to provide a safe learning environment for children year-round at Duration and Early Head Start sites, or for 10-months at Seasonal Head Start sites.

Outside the classroom, the environment around an NHS child is vastly changing. On the Navajo Nation, the average household size is 3.45 persons. 10.4 % of the Navajo Nation population is between the ages of 15 and 19 years old. 96.1% of the population on the Navajo Nation is American Indian or Alaska Native. The poverty rate for Navajo families with children under the age of five is 42.8%. The poverty rate on the Navajo Nation, in general, is 56.1%. Within the Navajo Head Start program, 71.6% of families are low-income. The unemployment rate on the Navajo Nation is 11 times higher than the general population. NHS families deserve all the support needed to help their children succeed—more funding will help bolster this support.

Only 22% of Navajo Households have a telephone and only 15% of Navajo households have a computer which could include desktop computers, laptops, notebooks, smartphones, or other devices designed to connect to the internet. The lack of technology makes it difficult for Navajo families to take advantage of online learning or stay in contact with their child's teacher. Adequate, accessible education is needed for parents to help their children grow and remain safe. An alarming 68.3% of children born experience premature mortality and 4.0% of pregnant women on the Navajo Nation do not engage in prenatal care. Expectant mothers and their infants need more support. NHS can provide this support through establishing more Early Head Start sites. Additionally, 27.9 out of every 1000 live births are children born to teenage mothers. The Navajo Nation needs resources to provide services to teenage mothers. (See Arizona Department of Health Services, 2021.)

Navajo Head Start's presence and voice is needed at the 2022 Office of Head Start Tribal Consultation, and the invitation is appreciated. There are many families on the Navajo Nation that we speak to and advocate for. In the spirit of collaboration, Navajo Head Start provides the following testimony:

A. OHS must increase foundational investment in Early Childhood programming

1. Training and Technical Assistance

NHS has the potential to be an independent school system and needs more training and technical assistance to accomplish this goal; and to coordinate more effectively with all early childhood programs on the Navajo Nation, regardless of their funding source. Consistent

and effective communication from OHS representatives is essential for the Navajo Head Start program to effectively coordinate early childhood programs and initiatives. Indeed, enhanced communication and onsite assessments to evaluate the challenges and benefits of the current structural layout of administering educational instruction is needed from the OHS administration and the granting agency.

2. Infrastructure

OHS should provide more funding opportunities and T/TA for tribal Head Start programs, enhancing support for cross jurisdictional entities that have various rights of ways and services. NHS needs financial investment to build collaborative efforts with other governmental entities and regulatory offices that will help increase outreach and services to remote, isolated, and impoverished communities. The Nation needs overarching infrastructure to provide these direct services and investment and support from OHS to create more infrastructure for Head Start services is needed.

Also, funding cycles for the larger tribes need to be reconsidered in that the grant application cycles should be done every 6 to 8 years rather than 5 years. The funding cycles should be aligned with the federal funding cycle rather than having staggered cycles. The Navajo Head Start begins its fiscal year on March 1st and ends on February 28th. When NHS begins its fiscal year, the Navajo Nation government is already 6 months into their fiscal year. This creates some barriers when NHS is requesting for Navajo Nation general funds program cash match that is set at 20%.

3. IT Systems Support

Funding is needed to build a wide area network/technology infrastructure to reach out to the large land base of the Navajo Nation, which is the service area of NHS. NHS serves over 86 communities that are located in remote and isolated areas. Additionally, funds are needed to recruit highly qualified IT support staff.

B. OHS must respect and promote the unique internal governance structures of Tribes

The federal government must undergo extensive cultural education when working with tribes. Cookie-cutter support does not address the true needs of tribal head start programs, but instead further entrenches tribes in a system that inherently does not account for their unique needs and circumstance. OHS must provide more culturally sensitive support, as well as accurate and consistent information. There should be a tribal liaison who has decision-making authority to consistently support tribes to administer their respective Head Start grant. The Head Start grant is one of the most heavily regulated grants in the United States – it is inconsistent, inaccurate, and limited, piece-meal support does not rise to the level of T/TA statutorily required by the Head Start regulations. The Federal Government must proactively acknowledge and address its institutional prejudice against tribes and work more collaboratively with tribal programs to ensure they are receiving the support they need.

Further, the administration of the Head Start program is exceedingly burdensome and inflexible, especially when it comes to tribal governments. OHS should allow more deference to tribal

governments in acknowledgment of their sovereign right to self-govern, as opposed to imposing strict federal regulations that do not work well within these tribal governmental systems. Moreover, let the tribal governments exercise and administer their Head Start programs that considers cultural sensitivity and relevance.

C. OHS must promote cross-program coordination and increased supportive funding

1. Barriers to effective program administration include:

- Politics and liability issues that affect initiatives intended to support early childhood such as integrating programs into the mainstream school systems.
 - Externally funded Programs are extremely under-funded.
 - Externally funded Programs have certain restrictive grant terms and conditions without negotiations afforded to Tribal Governments.
 - Lack of Training and Technical Assistance specific to individual Tribes
 - Lack of overall infrastructure development – technology, fiber optics, electricity, and water & sewer development.
 - Federal allocations and funding drawdowns are overly complicated and burdensome for tribes that already have internal governance systems in place – there needs to be a greater ability on the part of OHS to work with tribes more flexibly on funding allocations.

2. Funding recommendations include:

- Increase funding to create large scale internet along with equipment and software package to serve large Navajo Nation area to enhance childhood learning technology.
 - Funding for skype/zoom tribes for meetings and teaching tool to teachers and students
 - Funding for consultants Information Technology for rural areas on Navajo Nation
 - Funding for I.T. storage space for data/statistics on Navajo Nation
 - Funding for Training on I.T. infrastructure
 - Increase funding and infrastructure for electrical system plans and connecting through internet modes.
 - Increase funding for water development
 - Increase funding for plumbing
 - Increase funding for road development
 - Increase funding for housing and school facilities as some Head Start centers were built over 25 years ago
 - Increase funding for storage for Head Start facilities due to rural areas on Navajo Nation
 - Need for an intranet or usage of an intranet cloud to gather and get material needed for schools, data, and news.
 - Work in conjunction largely with 2020 Census to ensure funding for each student
 - Increase funding for dine language immersion culture integrated with childhood learning

- Increase funding for computer equipment without approval from funding agency for tablets for students for childhood learning
- Increase funding for glasses for students in Head Start
- Increase funding for dental for students in early childhood learning
- Increase funding for mental health in childhood learning along affected with neurological learning disabilities detected early in childhood years.
- Increase funding for bonus' specialized teachers (with licensures and certificates) in hard to fill positions
- Increase funding to Integrate Special Diabetes Program with Early Childhood Learning and Exercise
- Increase funding Integrate Elderly Program with Head Start Childhood Learning on Dine' language, Stories, Motor Skills
- Increase funding for safety in schools
 - Security Guards
 - Security equipment for schools
 - Safety classes and training for students
 - Basic First Aid for students in Head Start

D. OHS must increase its understanding of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the Navajo Nation

With the lack of necessary internet and broadband technology to provide long distance learning across the large territory of the Navajo Nation, E-learning and E-trainings are not readily accessible, and students already at-risk of falling behind are seeing their small chance at success and academic support being ripped away from them due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These students must not fall even further behind just because they live on a reservation. Closures of Head Start Centers risks the Nation's ability to provide essential support to the Nation's most vulnerable population, and without internet or widespread telephone access, it is extremely difficult for NHS to provide support to these young students.

OHS should continue to ease restrictions on approval of utilizing funds to address structural deficiencies, internet capabilities to tribal systems in utilizing funds for hardware, software, servers, and connectivity to ISP, as well as allow for increased funding to larger Native American tribes to build their telecommunication infrastructure while identifying early childhood education as a priority.

Other impacts from the pandemic on services to students include:

- The socio-emotional aspect of staff and community members –fear, panic and anxiety plagues the Nation. This impacts the motivation of staff and creates a lack of enthusiastic teachers, lack of community involvement and leadership in communities, losing certified and licensed teachers and/or bus drivers. OHS should invest in mental health support for NHS staff.
- The ability to teach is inhibited by lack of training and preparedness for such a pandemic and addressing following strict safety guidelines.

- A lack of effective communication systems available to tribal communities from the funding agency to the tribal government.
- The initiation of the elder and children’s generational lateral teachings are halted due to lack of technology, transportation, and funding.
- Lack of T/T.A. from federal government and access to funding readily available to Tribes. (Tribes have to apply; Funding should be allowing for greater assistance to Tribes).
- Tribes do not have a back-up system in place for records, data or safety materials related to the pandemic.

E. Resources needed for community mitigation of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic

The Navajo Nation needs education resources to help educate the people of what a pandemic is and its impact to the population and environment. The Nation needs more funding to identify and provide appropriate education packets as needed based on location and demographics of the Chapter communities.

The Navajo Nation recently moved from “orange” status to “yellow” status, thus allowing gatherings of up to 50 people while adhering to strict safety guidelines such as social distancing, sanitizing, required mask mandates. Moving forward, changes to office and classroom settings and space will be an issue. Ideas of how this can be managed while controlling how students interact would be helpful. The federal government should mandate contracted entities to develop policies for student and instructional interaction.

Other needs include:

- Large internet platforms
 - YouTube: TED talks database to create a larger testimony and oral history of the demographic region
- Constant health awareness from Diné traditional teachings and philosophy
 - This is hard because of the cultural conflicts
 - Doo achinijodliida
 - Doo hwi’iiniziinda
- Reassurances and investment from the Indian Health Services to help our communities stay healthy
- Allow the use of current funding with approval from funding agency
 - Safety collaboration
 - Access to funding for each student and their family for food and safety