

# Indigenous School up for approval

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**WINDOW ROCK** – Students living in the Gallup area will soon get another option for a school that would offer a culturally responsive education model that honors Navajo and Zuni cultures.

Known as the proposed Six Directions Indigenous School, its curriculum would use a project-based learning method that allows its K to 12 students to learn through “hands-on projects connected to local history, culture and ecologies.”

The school also plans to work with local tribes to design and deliver effective Diné and Zuni language instruction, said Six Directions Indigenous School Lead Organizer Lane Towery.

Towery added that the school’s curriculum includes a holistic wellness component by implementing a daily advisory structure, health curriculum and restorative justice model. A partnership with the Nation Indian Youth Leadership Project would also be able to carry out these

functions, Towery said.

But, before the school becomes a reality, it will first have to get the approval from the New Mexico Education Commission. The commission is holding a community input hearing on Monday, August 17 from 8:30 a.m. to 10 a.m. at the University of New Mexico-Gallup campus about whether to open the school or not.

“This is an opportunity for the local community to be heard by a state public education board and express what they want and need for their kids and community,” Towery added.

To get to this point was not an easy task.

Members of the proposed school’s Governing Council first went to the board for Gallup-McKinley County Schools to solicit support but didn’t quite get the approval, Towery said, explaining that that’s why the council is going before the New Mexico Education Commission.

Kevin Mitchell, a board member for Gallup-McKinley County Schools, said the district

currently has the capacity to provide the instruction the charter institution plans to provide.

Mitchell spoke of how the school district’s Indian Education Unit, headed by New Mexico State Rep. Wanda Doreen Johnson, is capable of providing a bilingual education.

“Gallup-McKinley needs to get their act together and seriously take care of our students and district by providing Navajo language and culture in a way that will help them,” he said.

Mitchell added that the Indian Education Unit, which gets federally funded Johnson O’Malley dollars to provide such instruction, “needs to really step up to provide this for our children because we are capable.”

And, if not, students from GMCS would find alternative schools such as Six Directions Indigenous School, Mitchell said.

“Six Directions is an institution that believes indigenous identities have not been respected by our traditional U.S. education system,” said Susan Estrada, a member of the Governing

Council.

Estrada said the proposed school is dedicated to changing that dynamic by cultivating proud students who are connected to their communities and cultural heritage.

Along with Estrada, the governing council also includes Masika Sweetwyne, a teacher, Ben Soce, an outdoor educator with the National Indian Youth Leadership Project, and Madeline Leyba, who has worked with GMCS and Teach for America in administrative roles.

Cultural Navajo practitioner Philmer Bluehouse is credited for establishing the Navajo Peacemaking Court and is the other member of the school’s governing council.

According to Towery, the public education commission will approve or deny the school on September 24 or 25. If approved, the school would prepare to open for the 2016-2017 school year.

“It’s becoming more real and exciting,” Towery said.

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