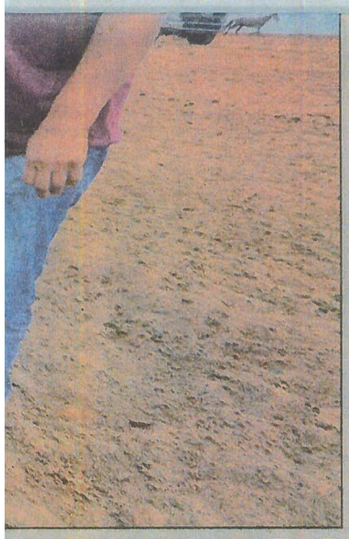

NAVAJO TIMES | KRISTA ALLEN

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SEE **REMOVAL | A3**

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SEE **VALOR | A6**

At Zuni meeting, parents and advocates call for education reforms promised under Yazzie/Martinez

BY DONOVAN QUINTERO
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

ZUNI, N.M. — At the Zuni Wellness Center, families, educators, advocates, and community members gathered on Aug. 14 for one of the regional meetings ordered by the court to address the Yazzie/Martinez ruling.

The meeting was part of a statewide series designed to collect public input that will shape a new education plan for New Mexico, a plan meant to comply with the 2018 court decision that found the state had failed to provide sufficient and equitable education for all students.

Voices of concern

Wilhelmina Yazzie, a lead plaintiff in the case, said she is still hearing many of the same concerns she first raised nearly a decade ago.

"I'm very glad that she was able just to be out there, truthful, outspoken," Yazzie said of another parent who shared her child's struggles during the meeting. "And I think we really need parents to come out like that, but then there's that little barrier of retaliation. A lot of parents I talked to (asked me to relay their message instead of attending)."

The day before, Yazzie gathered feedback from students at Six Directions Indigenous School in Gallup. Sixth through twelfth graders described bullying, overcrowded classrooms,

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commitment to ensuring affordable and reliable services for Arizona families.

"I know what it's like for families to live at the margins of modern infrastructure," she said. "That experience shapes every policy decision I make. It means I won't support policies that leave families choosing between paying an electric bill or putting food on the table."

Pratte is Kinyaa'áanii and born for Bilagáana. Her maternal grandfather is

experience includes serving as the director of Native American Affairs at the U.S. Small Business Administration, working as a trade analyst at the U.S. Department of Commerce, and co-founding Navajo Power, which develops large-scale renewable energy projects on tribal lands.

Through her consulting firm, Strongbow Strategies, she has helped expand broadband access in rural Arizona and supported Navajo entrepreneurs,

award.

Pratte is running as a Clean Elections candidate, promising her campaign will be powered by small-dollar donations instead of corporate money. "I am running as a Clean Elections candidate because I believe commissioners should be accountable to people, not corporate donors or out-of-state special interests," she said. "My campaign is powered by small-dollar donors, not utility lobbyists or political groups."

"Too many electricity, water and gas companies are making record profits while sticking families with higher bills," Pratte said. "On day one, I will hold utilities accountable for every penny they spend. Arizona families deserve to know where their money is going."

She pledged to push for stronger consumer protections, more public hearings, and a larger voice for advocates representing ratepayers. Her campaign platform includes requiring

now provides greater reliability, lower cost, and lower water usage than any other type of energy in our state. My approach is simple: clean energy, affordability and reliability are not mutually exclusive. They must go hand in hand".

She said her policies would emphasize expanding community solar programs, modernizing the power grid and ensuring new renewable projects deliver direct cost savings

trust, we must make hearings more transparent and accessible, publish plain-language summaries of rate cases, and create clear conflict-of-interest rules so Arizonans know commissioners are working for them."

She also called for independent audits of utility spending and requiring commissioners to provide written explanations for their votes. "Sunshine is the best disinfectant, and the public deserves no less," she said.

MEETING

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disrespect from staff, and a lack of cultural or language instruction. Several said English learners were labeled and isolated, while others said services for students with disabilities often disappeared. They also pointed to limited access to technology, restrictive rules, and few opportunities for hands-on, culturally relevant learning.

For Yazzie, those testimonies echoed her own experience as a mother.

"That was a lot of memories that brought back, because those were the same things that I encountered, especially when my oldest son was in third grade," she said. "(At) his parent-teacher conference, they told me, 'Your son is below the percentile where he should be.' And I asked, how do we help him? It seemed like they presented only the negativity … but didn't show us how to help our children."

A long legal fight

The Yazzie/Martinez lawsuit, filed in 2014, led to a 2018 decision declaring New Mexico's education system unconstitutional for its failure to serve Native students, English learners, students with disabilities, and those from low-income families. In 2024, the court again ruled for the plaintiffs, ordering the state to create a real plan with measurable reforms and community input. This August, the state launched a series of regional meetings – from Farmington and Santa Fe to Mescalero, Silver City, Zuni and Albuquerque – to gather that input.

Despite years of delay, Yazzie said she chooses to remain hopeful.

"As a Diné person, we have to stay positive and optimistic," she said. "Although we're going on what, almost past seven years now, I'm really staying optimistic that something is put in place sooner rather than later, because our children are still suffering. Although my boys are now grown, I still have my little one, … nieces, nephews, (and younger relatives) in our communities. It really is sad."

Rethinking education

Yazzie said the conversation is not just legal but cultural.

She said that when she talks about colonialism and decolonization, she means approaching issues with intention and grounding in Diné values — lessons about respect and how to treat one another. Leaders, she added, must remember they serve the people, not themselves or power. That same sense of responsibility, she said, should guide schools in creating the safety and community that Indigenous families nurture at home.

"That's what our children need to feel when they go to school," she said. "Even if parents are not there and they're working full time, … that community feeling, that safe space, … that acknowledgement – (it) will set a child in a way where they're eager to learn and confident in themselves."

Students want change

As students at Six Directions described favoritism, exclusion, and testing-driven instruction, Yazzie said it underscored the need to abandon practices that don't work.

"I feel like the more we talk about it, the more it's being realized that yes, we need to do this," she said. "(Students told us about) favoritism, not being included, not being acknowledged. A lot of it goes back to following the same system we're used to, (but) it's not helping our children. We need to transform our education in a way that helps (them)."

She noted New Mexico's low national ranking in education.

"Of course, I'm sure you know that we're (near the bottom) in the nation," Yazzie said. "We need to get out of that. And as long as we do community work and these gatherings continue, I really hope … this plan collaborates with everybody – (tribes, parents, and communities)."

The way forward

Yazzie said solutions already exist.

"We've offered information before. We have that Tribal Remedy Framework that's already in place, which includes all of what the Indian Education Act is about," she said. "And we have the coalition group Transform New Mexico Ed, (which) also has a platform that includes everybody across the state. There's a lot of information out there, and community work is what's going to make this change – coming together … and focusing on our children and their future."

As regional meetings continue across New Mexico, Yazzie said she remains determined that the state must listen and act. For her, the case is not abstract policy but the lived reality of children who deserve schools that reflect their cultures, honor their languages, and provide the support they need to succeed.

After nearly seven years of litigation, she said the goal remains simple: an education system that finally puts students first.

Seven years after Yazzie/Martinez ruling, Zuni families say little has changed

BY DONOVAN QUINTERO
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

ZUNI, N.M. — Seven years after the landmark Yazzie/Martinez v. New Mexico ruling found the state was failing to meet its constitutional obligation to provide sufficient education to Native American, English language learner, low-income and special education students, community members in Zuni say too little has changed.

Parents, elders, and tribal leaders recently gathered to share concerns about the state of education in Zuni and to demand reforms that reflect the cultural, linguistic and social realities of their children.

For some, the fight is deeply personal.

'Night and day' differences

Jeni Gardener, a Zuni mother, said her decision to remove her children from the district came after years of frustration.

"They wanted some action. They wanted to hear from the community, from the parents, from the students, from the teachers. So some meetings were scheduled all over the state, and so this is one of them," Gardener said.

She described a stark contrast between Zuni's tribally run Head Start program, which emphasizes culture and language, and the district's reliance on standardized testing.

"The Zuni emergent culture that we are talking about is best seen at that Head Start level," she said. "They're training Native teachers and encouraging them to speak the language from the beginning, even if the student is not responding in Zuni."

Her son thrived in that setting but struggled when he entered public school.

"The disparity between that program and what we are seeing in the Zuni public schools, the disparity is so great. It's night and day," she said.

Gardener recalled being handed a printout showing her son was "48 percent proficient" in kindergarten.

"This piece of paper does not tell me the actual skills of my child and where they actually are performing at," she said. "So now my child went from this very supportive system into a Zuni public school that is, it's almost like a survival of the fittest. And we're expecting our students to be productive in that kind of environment. And it doesn't work."

She stressed the problem is systemic.

"When we talk about educators, when we talk about quality education, it's not anybody's one fault. It's a systematic problem," Gardener said.

Pressing for accountability

Zuni Tribal Council member Shirley Bellson said she has repeatedly pressed the local school board on compliance with the Yazzie/Martinez ruling but has seen little progress.

"We have brought up the school district's compliance … but it just seems like there's silence," Bellson said. "If they do say anything, they will say, well, we don't get the funding with it. You know, there's no money to comply."

She pointed to state test scores as evidence of failure.

"Their math skill is 9% … compared to 25% from the other state schools. The reading scores are 15% compared to about 34%," she said. "So I read them the scores, and I said, it's a fault between you and the parents. We need to sit down together and work something out. We can't continue blaming each other. We have to realize that the scores are telling us we're not doing well, we're failing our students."

Bellson said families are also leaving because of bullying and a lack of response from administrators. She also criticized what she called double standards around cultural practices.

"Our young men … get initiated into participating in religious dancing … and when they ask to be excused for that, they're not allowed. They get docked," she said. "But then when it's sports, you know, if they have to go somewhere … they let the students go. So there's double standards about how they treat our kids."

'Curriculums don't make sense'

Wilhelmina Yazzie, the lead plaintiff in the case, said she has been meeting with students across the region.

"What I heard was that our schools don't honor tribal languages. They have more rules to label students," she said. "A lot of them have … mental issues and housing insecurity. They're being pushed away because they have a disability. And … their curriculums don't make sense and they're not for them."

But students also described the kind of schools they want: "No judgments of students by staff, collaboration with teachers and parents, a safe place, culturally relevant with language classes," Yazzie said.

She argued true reform means breaking free of rigid, colonial frameworks.

"I think we just need to get out of that whole colonial context of how public school was essentially set up … rows and what kind of military style," she said. "When I grew up with my grandparents … it was all community based. We got together, we were open … and that's how I was able to learn my language."

Language at the center

Former Zuni Council member and elder Edward Wemytewa said any solution must begin with language and culture.

"In order to be sound, you must be fluent in language, you must be able to translate," he said. "If you don't know your worldview, you're going to do an interpretation that's going to harm us more so than anything else."

He recalled years of taking students camping and encouraging them to design their own projects. "Many of them graduated in college. So I believe that if you have a good program that stimulates and is self-driven, we could really see positive outcomes."

A question of responsibility

For Gardener, the Yazzie/Martinez case highlighted long-standing disparities.

"We are already at a disadvantage," she said. "And all that did was highlight the many faults … the many disparities, and how they leave us at a deficit."

She warned that without change tribal sovereignty itself is weakened.

"We cannot have that kind of self-determination and fail our children and fail our future," she said.

Her fear is that her own children will grow up disconnected from their community.

"How I imagine my son moving in the world, unfortunately, is going to be away from Native culture," she said.

For Bellson, the way forward requires honesty and cooperation. "We need to sit down together and work something out … we're failing our students," she said.

And for Gardener, it comes down to accountability. "We need to be stronger. That's what it comes down to. We need to take accountability for our people," she said.

REMOVAL

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animals roam free again. "They

"It needs to be done," Yazzie

Begay said she and her

"We rounded up a pretty good