



25TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL

25TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Council members address concerns with U.S. Department of Education's legal interpretations at UNM town hall



Speaker Crystalyne Curley addressed a town hall held at UNM regarding the U.S. Department of Education's Dear Colleague letter.

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — 25th Navajo Nation Council Speaker Crystalyne Curley and Council Delegate Andy Nez participated in a town hall with ethnic studies academic leaders, students, and elected leaders to address a Feb. 14 letter issued by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, which cautioned that federally funded educational institutions may risk losing funding if they engage in race-based practices, including affirmative action and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

The town hall was hosted by faculty from the University of New Mexico's (UNM) Ethnic Studies and Community Town Hall Planning Committee on March 29, to weigh the implications of the Feb. 14 letter that outlined the U.S. Department of Education's interpretations of Title IV of the Civil Rights Act, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and other relevant authorities. The letter advised that relying on race, color, or national origin for education programs and admission into academic institutions is a violation of federal law.

Speaker Curley noted that the Council's Naabik'iyati Committee unanimously adopted resolution NABIMA-13-25 on March 27, reaffirming the political classification of the Navajo Nation as opposed to a racial classification that would fall under the DEI framework. The resolution also urges the federal government to consult with the Navajo Nation before implementing executive actions that affect education policies for tribes.

“Our ancestors battled not only hunger and poverty but also the darker forces of injustice that sought to erase our language, identity, and connection to the land,” said Speaker Curley. “These forces return today in the form of policies that threaten our tribal sovereignty and existence. The federal government cannot undo the rights our ancestors fought to protect. We carry the strength and resilience they instilled in us, and though I do not take this fight lightly, I know we will prevail.”

Speaker Curley also expressed a commitment to enhancing educational opportunities for all students while ensuring that DEI initiatives remain a central part of academic and campus life. She emphasized the importance of fostering inclusive environments that support both academic excellence and diversity.

Soon after the Department of Education issued its letter, Delegate Andy Nez brought his concerns to the Council’s Health, Education, and Human Services Committee (HEHSC). In response, the Committee requested a legal analysis from the Navajo Nation Department of Justice and proceeded with legislation sponsored by Council Delegate George Tolth.

During the town hall, Delegate Nez emphasized the importance of continuing to educate federal officials about the unique political and legal status of tribes and working together to safeguard resources. He also noted that he would soon introduce legislation to address federal executive orders.

“The impacts will be felt doubly among our children and grandchildren,” said Delegate Nez. “Leaders at the national level need to understand our unique status as tribes. That advocacy will continue among my colleagues. And for many, these are discussions that I encourage everyone to have at their dinner tables and in the classrooms because it affects us.”

Navajo Nation Vice President Richelle Montoya also spoke during the town hall, calling on students and advocates to remain strong and unified in their messaging and stance against divisive policies and legal interpretations.

U.S. Congresswoman Melanie Stansbury (D-NM) also spoke during the town hall and offered her strong support for diversity and DEI programs within universities. New Mexico Lt. Gov. Howie Morales, New Mexico State Rep. Patricia Roybal Caballero (D-Dist. 13), and UNM Senior Provost Dr. Barbara Rodriguez also offered their support during the event.

The town hall also featured public statements from numerous UNM students who shared their experiences and called for action to prevent the elimination of DEI programs and cultural initiatives at the university.

The 25th Navajo Nation Council thanks UNM’s Ethnic Studies and Community Town Hall Planning Committee, students, and supporters for hosting the town hall.

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