

Begaye calls for immediate improvements to Indian education

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Albuquerque's IED outlines five goals

ALBUQUERQUE—President Russell Begaye urged outgoing New Mexico Public Education Secretary Christopher Ruszkowski to “act now” to ensure Native students’ needs are met in the state’s next administration Nov. 26.

Ruszkowski, a guest at the New Mexico Indian Education Advisory Council, leaves office Jan. 1 when newly elected Gov. Michelle Lujan-Grisham is inaugurated. Speaking in front of leaders of New Mexico’s tribes and pueblos, President Begaye asked Ruszkowski for four specific actions from both the current administration and the transition team.

“We need a commitment from this administration to make an impact before the transition,” Begaye said. “You can act now to make a difference in Indian education for the next four years.”

Begaye pressed Ruszkowski for immediate and mandatory cultural sensitivity training in school districts throughout the state—starting with the 23 districts that serve American Indian students. He also requested that the state create a position for a deputy secretary of Indian education and explore smarter uses of impact aid and grant funding.

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“The funding process needs to be streamlined,” Begaye said. “By the time money is available, in our accounts, we don’t have enough time to spend it. This needs to change.”

Because of a boom in the oil and gas industries, New Mexico could see a \$2 billion surplus in its budget next year. Begaye said he wants to see some of those dollars invested in Indian education, including specific projects like school bus route improvements, the expansion of broadband services and salary increases to help recruit and retain quality teachers.

Begaye’s remarks came during a government-to-government summit hosted by the New Mexico Public Education Department’s Indian Education Advisory Council. The four-day summit marked the final time all of the state’s tribal leaders will meet with Ruszkowski.

The summit, held at the Santa Ana Pueblo, also served to update tribal leaders about the status of Yazzie vs. Martinez, the landmark lawsuit that sought to end reports that consistently rank New Mexico’s education system at the bottom and reveal unconscionable achievement gaps for American Indian students. A state judge in July ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and ordered schools to provide the most at-risk students with all the programs and supports they need to succeed.

In response to the ruling, Albuquerque School District’s Indian Education Department identified five goals to address the needs of American Indian children. During the government-to-government summit Nov. 26, Begaye asked Ruszkowski for a public statement of support for the five goals.

“There is no good reason Indian students always score the lowest among all ethnic groups,” he said. “We see these statistics over and over, with no real solutions. It’s time we work aggressively to address this. Once Albuquerque implements these goals, we should see districts across the state doing the same.”

The Five Goals:

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1. Establish an Indian Education Department as a separate department under the superintendent's office.
2. Establish a district indigenous education and training center.
3. Increase culturally relevant materials and textbooks about American Indians.
4. Increase recruitment and retention of American Indian educators.
5. Expand the American Indigenous Language Program.