



NAVAJO HEAD START

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 18, 2015

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Navajo Head Start celebrates 50 years

The program was established in 1965

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Navajo Head Start (NHS) is celebrating 50 years on the Navajo Nation. The program was established in 1965 and has benefited the Navajo People with early childhood educational services since.

In 1965, NHS opened its doors after being created as part of a much-larger project launched by the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). Then-U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson announced “Project Head Start” in 1964 as an effort to fight poverty in the U.S.



The program was designed to help break the cycle of poverty by providing preschool children and low-income families with a comprehensive program to help meet their emotional, social, health, nutritional and psychological needs, according to the Office of Head Start.

The first head start program was in operation in the summer of 1965 and it was designed as an eight-week demonstration project used to validate its intent and purpose as a new program.

In the same year, the Navajo Tribe, as it was referred to at the time, was awarded \$920,000 from the OEO to set up programs on the reservation including the Office of Navajo Economic Opportunity (ONEO). Peter MacDonald Sr. was appointed director at that time to head a program that established preschool classes to help prepare children for learning. This program eventually evolved into Navajo Head Start.

By 1969, Head Start was a full year-round service. From that point, Head Start continued to grow and its funding surpassed more than \$1 billion by 1984.

Today, there are more than 50-plus head start programs across the country and there is one in every state in the U.S., including the District of Columbia and the six U.S. territories that provide services to more than 30 million children and their families.

Just as the national head start program improved and expanded, so did NHS. At its peak, NHS had more than 120 head start centers in five regions of operation spread across 27,000-square-miles of the Navajo Nation. NHS implemented its early head start program dedicated to providing care and early education to infants and toddlers, as well as providing assistance to expecting mothers.

NHS has seen a lot of success. And like other programs, they have hit some bumps in the road. At one point, NHS was at the cusp of losing its program and funding because of noncompliance. But in 2014, under new leadership and energy, NHS passed its federal review and regained full-funding of its programs.

Today, NHS operates 96 centers across four regions that provide services to hundreds of children. The future is bright for NHS and they are looking towards expansion of its programs and opening more centers to serve a growing population on the Navajo Nation.

In 50 years, NHS has become an integral part of the Navajo Nation and has played a vital role in the development and success of its children.

Sharon H. Singer, assistant superintendent of the Navajo Nation Department of Diné Education, is celebrating the program's 50 year existence but said there is much more work to be done.

"We are proud of the work we accomplished thus far, but we know there is always more that can be done," said Singer. "Navajo Head Start is continuously searching for ways to improve the development process, child health, family and community involvement, and the infrastructure needed to provide services."

"We want the best for our children on the Navajo Nation because they deserve the best," she added.

In celebration, NHS has commissioned a new 50th Anniversary logo that will be used for the year and will plan a celebration later this summer.

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Navajo Head Start is the largest federally-funded grant program in the country. Head Start and Early Head Start services are provided within the geographical area of the Navajo Nation, an area approximately the size of West Virginia that spans more than 27,000-square-miles across the states of Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. The Central Administration offices are located in Window Rock, Ariz., capital of the Navajo Nation.