

PANEL

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district resisted subpoenas, prompting the EEOC to seek enforcement in federal court in 2025. Gallup-McKinley responded with its own lawsuit, arguing the charge was vague and unlawful.

Against this backdrop, the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission decided to take testimony in three locations to give parents, staff and advocates a platform to describe whether they see progress – or continued inequities.

Heat off, internet down, students hungry

The most urgent testimony came in Pueblo Pintado, where Erlene Henderson described the conditions at Tse Yi' Gai High School. She said the campus often lacks functioning heat, reliable internet, basic staff support, and students going hungry.

"Students are always cold," Henderson told the commission. "Every time when they turn it on, the heater's on, but it's blowing cold air." She said the problem has persisted across winters, leaving students bundled in jackets during class.

Henderson said a custodian position has been unfilled for months, forcing teachers to clean their own classrooms. Substitutes "don't show up," she said, and internet service drops so frequently that students are moved into the gym when online work cannot be completed.

She urged the district to open on-campus teacher housing to all staff, not just teachers, in order to help recruit and retain employees in the remote community. And she called for a dormitory so that nearby students could enroll without facing hours-long transportation challenges.

"Why can't Tse Yi' Gai build a dormitory for students who live beyond two miles?" she asked.

Her testimony echoed broader concerns about whether rural Navajo schools receive the resources needed to meet even minimum standards of safety and learning.

Perhaps the most concerning



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A resident testifies before the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission at Breadsprings Chapter on Sept. 16 during a hearing on Gallup-McKinley County Schools.



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A portrait of Chief Manuelito hangs outside the meeting room as the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission takes testimony at the Tohatchi Chapter House on Sept. 17.

testimony that's been given during the three-day public meeting, Henderson said in Diné to Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission Executive Director Leonard Gorman that students at Tse Yi Gai High School said they also do not eat well.

"Maybe that's why they're not doing well in school," Henderson said to Gorman in Diné.

Discipline, due process questioned

In Tohatchi, families spoke about school discipline they viewed as unfair and damaging.

Eunice, a parent and grandparent, said that decades ago families received clear handbooks, but now she is unsure if parents get consistent information. She worried about the effect on her grandson, who saw friends sidelined by suspensions.

"It upset him a lot because he felt bad that his friends were affected this way and they couldn't get to graduate," she said on Sept. 17. "If they're going to enforce discipline, it needs to be the same across the board. It doesn't matter what background you come from."

Andrew Perry said his grandson was suspended after grabbing another student who had hit him.

"That's the only part the security saw," Perry said. "Based on that, he was suspended for five days, got off the basketball team, and the school wouldn't let us look at the camera." The punishment, he said, left



SPECIAL TO THE TIMES | DONOVAN QUINTERO

A resident addresses the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission at the Tohatchi Chapter House on Sept. 17 during hearings on Gallup-McKinley County Schools, where speakers alleged discriminatory, inequitable and unsafe conditions.

lasting harm.

"It affected him emotionally, especially the part where he was told, you're not going to play basketball anymore. That really hurt him," Perry said in Tohatchi.

Advocates said Navajo families are often excluded from crucial decisions. Roxanne Arthur, a social worker with the Native American Disability Law Center, said discipline hearings for students with disabilities often happen "behind closed doors" without the staff who know the student best.

"Discipline is very linear and it's not culturally sensitive," she said. "All behavior is communicative. Discipline does not change behavior."

Frieda Joe, a grandmother, said her granddaughter faced allegations and was asked to sign paperwork she believed

was an admission of guilt. She added that finding district policies online was nearly impossible.

"I had to get on my computer and search, it was kind of hidden way back somewhere," she said in Pueblo Pintado.

Staff say they're silenced

More than a week earlier at Breadsprings hearing, testimonies focused on employees who said they were silenced or mistreated when they spoke up.

Valerie Scott, a high school science teacher of 20 years, told the commission she was instructed to assign minimum grades to students who never attended class.

"We were told to give 40 percent, 60 percent to students that had never shown," Scott said on Sept. 16. "I refused."

She also described unequal professional development opportunities, saying she paid her own way to attend a training while non-Native colleagues had theirs funded. She said she later feared retaliation when subpoenaed to testify in a personnel case. During questioning, she recalled, a district official handed a lawyer a note asking, "Do you think you are truthful?" The experience, she said, was "shocking."

Kimberly Davis of Pinehaven, New Mexico, said her 14-year-old son, recovering from ankle surgery, was berated by an assistant principal who told him transportation was draining the budget.

"He harassed, he bullied, he discriminated against my son," Davis said in Baa'haali.

She said her son came home in tears and began to see himself as a burden.

After the public meeting in Baa'haali, Superintendent Mike Hyatt said the district takes all complaints seriously but rejected the suggestion of systemic bias.

He said the district investigates allegations and urged the commission to share its data.

"Accusations without facts are not helpful," Hyatt said.

He noted that the district has expanded early-college programs and housing for teachers and cited test score gains at some rural schools.

Commissioners pressed broader concerns about sovereignty and oversight. Commissioner Roscoe Herrera said Navajo students in border town schools often lack protection

from unfair treatment.

"There is not that type of oversight; from our Navajo Nation government," he said.

He added that reports of students being cold and hungry were especially disturbing.

"They're not being afforded an education, (or) that fair, equal treatment," he said in Pueblo Pintado after the meeting.

Gorman said the commission was created after a fatal Farmington shooting that raised questions of racial violence. He said the office will transcribe testimony, meet with district leaders and coordinate with both state and federal justice departments. Gorman said accounts from staff carried classic markers of bias.

"On the face of it, there are aspects of race discrimination," he said, describing situations where Navajo educators were displaced in favor of non-Native colleagues.

He also drew a distinction between everyday preferences and racism.

"Discrimination – we all discriminate," Gorman said. "Racism is making a judgment based on another person's race, ethnicity, gender."

On sovereignty, Gorman said the Navajo Nation often limits its own authority.

"Sovereignty is the bedrock, self-determination. You make decisions for yourself," he said. "Our ancestors had self-determination a long time ago. Us Navajos today, we're brainwashed to believe the only way is through Western education."

Herrera said the duty now is to ensure Navajo students are recognized and treated fairly.

"My purpose is to hear these testimonies, and when they're analyzed, then we can identify what we need to work on," he said. "For me, it means decolonization, to promote our identity."

Gorman emphasized urgency, especially with winter approaching.

"If people are sharing information with us, we're going to have to address it," he said.

Before leaving Pueblo Pintado, Gorman said the accounts of Tse Yi Gai students being hungry and cold in school was a concern that the commission needs to address as soon as possible.

"It needs to be relayed the sooner the better," he said.



Faith Leaders Standing For Peace

Today, on the International Day of Peace, we as faith leaders come together to express our united belief in peaceful civic engagement. At a time when divisive rhetoric and actions are increasingly accepted as a form of expression, we condemn violence in all its forms.

Relying on our diverse faith traditions, we speak with a united voice to declare that differences of opinion in civil society must be addressed with mutual respect and dignified dialogue.

Our faiths require us to be peacemakers in our communities through our words and deeds. We call on elected officials, community leaders, and all Arizonans to embrace the ideals of listening and good faith negotiations.

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