



State Adopts Navajo Language Textbook

By Dan Boyd

Journal Staff Writer

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SANTA FE — The Navajo language has long had an uneasy existence with the outside world.

During World War II, Navajo books were burned in bonfires to prevent the language, which was used as a top-secret military code, from falling into enemy hands. During previous decades, Navajo students sent to Indian schools were frequently barred from speaking their native tongue.

"The language it seems has just been sabotaged over and over," said Evangeline Parsons Yazzie, a Navajo professor at Northern Arizona University. "Our children are not proud of the language like they used to be."

That could be changing.

New Mexico became the first state in the nation to formally adopt a Navajo language textbook on Tuesday when state Education Secretary Veronica Garcia introduced a text co-authored by Yazzie as one of 85 core publications to be used by the state.

Starting in the fall of 2009, the textbook, called "Din Bizaad Binahoo'aah," or "Rediscovering the Navajo Language," will be used in 10 New Mexico school districts that offer Navajo instruction as well as Bureau of Indian Education schools.

Describing it as a historic first and a highlight of her career, Garcia said the textbook's adoption will help Navajo students improve overall academic performance. "If their own language is strong, they're going to be that much stronger in their English."

The Navajo language has been taught in New Mexico for years using Navajo language speakers as guest instructors.

But like other native languages, the prevalence of the Navajo language has dropped in recent years. According to U.S. Census data, 12 percent of Navajo children from ages 5 to 17 and living on Navajo reservations spoke only English in 1980. That increased to 28 percent in 1990 and 43 percent in 2000.

Said Garcia, "If we lose the language, we lose the culture."