

**National Indian Education Association
2023 NIEA Parent of the Year Winner
Wilhelmina Yazzie**

Ms. Wilhelmina Yazzie from Gallup, New Mexico is a member of the Navajo Nation and a strong advocate of educational rights and equity for New Mexico's Native American children. Ms. Yazzie grew up in Casamero Lake, New Mexico located in the eastern region of the Navajo Nation reservation. She is a mother and parent of three children and a strong advocate of educational equity for Native American children. Her concern was prompted by what she observed her own children experiencing when they were attending New Mexico public schools. She observed first-hand her children struggling academically because they were not receiving the appropriate academic support they needed. Her concern for her own and other children led her to consider how the state's public education system was failing them and that she needed to step up and fight for the rights of children in New Mexico. This strong concern led her to agree to be named as the lead plaintiff in a landmark education lawsuit known as *Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico*. The suit, filed in 2014 on behalf of Native American and Hispanic students, English language learners, low-income children, and students with disabilities was a major lawsuit in which the court agreed in 2018 that New Mexico's public education system had failed these students, finding that both the New Mexico Indian Education Act and the Bilingual Multicultural Education Act had been violated and that the state's education agency needed to transform their existing public education system. Over the course of more than 10 years while the suit was being developed and argued to the present, the persistence and commitment of Ms. Yazzie never wavered. She continued to speak out about the inequities of the education system informing the general public, tribes and parents about the lack of educational opportunities that were the basis for the lawsuit.

While it has been five years since the Judge's ruling on this case and many of the court's rulings still have not yet been fully addressed by the New Mexico Public Education Department, Ms. Yazzie continues to volunteer her time to ensure that the case is not forgotten and that the state's educational agency is still held accountable for transforming the public education system. Her leadership and advocacy for improving education for Native American students is especially reflected in countless public forums where she has spoken about the case, traveling around the state to meet with tribal communities, parents and tribal leaders in collaboration with the legal staff of the New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty and Native faculty from the University of New Mexico's Institute for American Indian Education. She has also testified on behalf of Native American students before legislative committees and public

hearings, including the education study committee and the house and senate committees on education. She has been a key public voice before these public legislative entities urging them to make major investments in support of crucial transformational changes that need to be made at both local and state levels. Besides her role as a strong parent advocate Ms. Yazzie also serves as a paralegal. She is licensed as a law advocate to practice in Navajo tribal courts.

In 2020, she was selected by the National Education Association Human and Civil Rights Commission to receive the inaugural *Wilma Mankiller Memorial Award* for her efforts to ensure that the children of New Mexico receive an equitable and quality education. She was also recognized as *Woman of the Year* in 2023 by USA Today and has received strong support for her work by the All Pueblo Council of Governors and the Navajo Nation.

Ms. Yazzie's dedication to the work of advocating for educational change and improvements, the need for culturally relevant curriculum materials, and increased opportunities for Native students to receive Native language instruction while in school, have all been hallmarks of her dedication to ensure that Native students receive an equitable and sufficient education as called for in New Mexico's state constitution. She is truly an exemplary Parent model of persistence, commitment and service to the education community and to Native children.