

2021 NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Human and Civil Rights Award Winner

■ WILHELMINA YAZZIE



The inaugural Wilma Mankiller Memorial Award is named for the pioneering Native American community activist, social justice warrior, and first woman elected as Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation. The first recipient of the award that bears Mankiller's name continues her legacy. Wilhelmina Yazzie is a freedom fighter who waged a brave battle for Indigenous children to have the right to a quality education.

In 2014, Yazzie, a law advocate and mother of three in New Mexico's sorely underfunded Gallup-McKinley school district, was the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit brought against the state of New Mexico. Yazzie and several hundred parents in the Navajo Nation sought to correct years of neglect directed at low income Native students. Ms. Yazzie's willingness to spearhead a daunting and exhausting legal battle in the name of quality education for New Mexico's students is a testament to her deeply-held conviction that schools can one day be equitable, support multicultural students, and offer curricula that helps them learn about their history and language.

After four years of hard fought legal maneuvering, in 2018, courts ruled in the plaintiff's favor, finding that the state had failed its constitutional obligation to provide a free and equitable public school system for these underserved children that enriched them culturally and properly integrated their heritage into the school system's curricula. The decision resulted in reforms that created an environment where Indigenous youth could finally embrace their history.

Yazzie's determination was born of her belief that a multicultural education would promote academic excellence by instilling a sense of pride in one's identity. Her lawsuit victory led to a sixteen percent increase in public education funding statewide, translating to almost 450 million dollars in 2019.

But it isn't just about throwing money... it's how it's applied. Wilhelmina's efforts put in place mandates to increase the ranks of certified instructors for English language learners, provide children with access to technological resources, create summer school programs for extended learning, and develop Pre-K programs for over 25,000 three and four year olds who still lack them.

The struggle continues for Wilhelmina Yazzie. Currently she is lobbying to establish the Indian Education Fund, Bilingual Multicultural Education Act, and a slew of initiatives to foster a climate of respect for a people's true heritage. She stresses the need for action now more than ever, as the Covid crisis is making all students fall through the educational cracks, in particular, low-income Native children who lack broadband access for remote schooling.

Wilhelmina Yazzie was just a mom who wanted to make things right for her kids. History will now see her as an American hero, who like Wilma Mankiller, helped to create equal opportunity for all.

NEA Human and Civil Rights | 1201 16th Street, N.W. | Washington, DC 20036 | nea.org/hcr

