

Zuni Youth Enrichment Project Will Resume In- and After-School Programming in March

ZUNI, NM (Feb. 12, 2025) — In March, the Zuni Youth Enrichment Project will resume its popular in- and after-school programs in partnership with Zuni Public School District. They include a traditional social dance class at Shiwi Ts'ana Elementary School, a traditional dance elective class at Zuni Middle School, and the “Rooted in Healthy Traditions” after-school program, with ZSPD providing snacks and transportation.

“The community partnership between (ZPSD) and ZYEP is vital to providing well-rounded support, encouragement and unique experiences for our local youth to thrive,” said Dr. Dominique Dosedo, ZMS principal. “The benefits of ZYEP in both in-school and after-school programming are the legendary values that our youth will remember and use forever.”

Dance Class at Shiwi Ts'ana Elementary School

The dance class at Shiwi Ts'ana Elementary School will take place during teacher Shanell Leekya's physical education class from Mar. 3 to May 2. Led by ZYEP Youth Development Leader Rani Yamutewa and featuring a drum group, it will be available to 430 students in all 27 classes, from pre-K to 5th grade.

“The dances will be a variety of social dances, including the rainbow dance, buffalo dance, harvest dance and many more,” Yamutewa said. “The class will allow our elementary school students to practice for their Indigenous Day performance on Apr. 25, and it will give them valuable opportunities to exercise using traditional songs.”

During each class, ZYEP Food Sovereignty Leader Khass Hattie will teach the “Rooted in Healthy Traditions” curriculum, which includes food sovereignty-related topics such as agriculture, nutrition and healthy recipes. Then the drum songs and dance instruction will begin.

Made possible with assistance from the New Mexico Department of Health’s Healthy Kids Healthy Communities initiative, the elementary school class incorporates New Mexico’s “Eat Smart to Play Hard” state curriculum during the fall semester and ZYEP’s “Rooted in Healthy Traditions” curriculum in the spring.

“We’re grateful to Shanell Leekya,” Yamutewa said. “Her collaboration with ZYEP allowed our program to take place during her P.E. specials class, and she has provided a bridge between our youth project and the school for a wonderful Indigenous Day collaboration.”

The ZYEP team also expressed gratitude to drummers and singers Mangaysha Kallestewa and Cyrus Lutse, who are

contributing so much to the in-school programs at both Shiwi Ts'ana Elementary School and Zuni Middle School.

Traditional Dance Elective at Zuni Middle School

At Zuni Middle School, ZYEP is partnering with teacher Erica Nahohai to offer an elective class for 25-30 students that focuses on building social and cultural connectedness. The class is made possible with support from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAHMSA), the New Mexico Department of Health, the New Mexico Behavioral Health Services Division and the ZMS team.

This school year, ZMS and ZYEP are offering the elective class twice. In the first quarter, it focused on traditional art, and for the fourth quarter, it will focus on traditional dance.

“Students will learn traditional songs and their meaning as well as the movements,” Yamutewa explained. “They also will have the opportunity to select which dance they would like to perform for their big showcase.”

The dance elective class will start on Mar. 24, after the ZPSD spring break, and conclude with a May 9 showcase for the entire school. This will coincide with the middle school's Indigenous Week activities.

“I enjoy seeing the students participate in the dances and other activities,” teacher Erica Nahohai said. “It brings me joy when students engage in something that keeps them rooted to our culture.

“I feel that another important thing this unit brings to the class is the self-confidence students gain either from dancing or completing hands-on activities,” she continued. “This unit also will allow students to gain more self-independence and add on to the building blocks of their growth, mentally and physically.”

Rooted in Healthy Traditions

This semester, ZYEP is offering the middle school edition of its “Rooted in Healthy Traditions” after-school program. Made possible with support from the CDC’s Tribal Practices for Wellness in Indian Country and the New Mexico Department of Health, the program incorporates special focus areas that include traditional art, knowledge sharing and food sovereignty.

The program will take place at 3:30-5 p.m. every Tuesday through Thursday, from Mar. 25 to May 15. On RHT days, ZPSD will provide snacks and bus transportation for all students at the end of the program.

“As always, RHT will promote cultural and social connectedness and holistic wellness by bringing our Zuni

youth together with intergenerational mentors and engaging them in programs that emphasize traditional art, nutrition, farming, physical activity and Zuni language,” said Tara Wolfe, ZYEP’s program manager. “They will learn and practice healthy Zuni traditions and language to strengthen their positive cultural identity through spiritual, mental, physical and emotional health.”

ZYEP staff in the Youth Development, Food Sovereignty and Art departments will collaborate to lead activities in the different core subject areas, and RHT mentors Keely Bobelu and Raymond Homer, who have participated in ZYEP’s youth programs themselves, will provide valuable support to staff and students alike. Their leadership positions are made possible with support from the Zuni Education and Career Development Center

“Through RHT, we also will be providing the children with access to a variety of community resources and programs,” Wolfe noted. “These include the A:shiwi A:wan Museum and Heritage Center, Shumak’olo:wa Health Center, Major Market and ARTZ (Ancestral Rich Treasures of Zuni) Cooperative.”

To learn more about the Zuni Youth Enrichment Project and its programs, and for information about making donations, partnering with ZYEP, and volunteering, call (505) 782-8000 or visit zyep.org. And, to stay up to date on the latest news and events, follow the nonprofit youth organization on

Facebook (/zuniyouthenrichmentproject), Instagram (@zuniyouthenrichmentproject), YouTube (/ZuniYouth), and TikTok (/zyep09)

Founded in 2009, the nonprofit Zuni Youth Enrichment Project is dedicated to promoting resilience among Zuni youth so they will grow into strong, healthy adults who are connected with Zuni traditions. ZYEP fulfills its mission by providing positive role models, enriching programs, and nurturing spaces that contribute to the healthy development of Zuni youth. ZYEP strives to provide every child with the encouragement and opportunities they need to reach their full potential.

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