

SEPTEMBER SPECIAL EDITION

Inspecting PPEs

At a CTE
Woodwork Class

Visiting a CTE
Computer room

At Cha-Cha Oceanview
Middle School

CNMI Public School System



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STUDENTS FIRST

• Accountability • Responsibility • Transparency

In-Focus

STRONG LEADERSHIP HIGH-LEVEL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM IMPRESSIVE USE OF FEDERAL DOLLARS

How The U.S. Department of Education Senior Risk Consultant Affirms Public School System's Level of Accountability, Transparency, and Integrity of Federal Investments in Public Education in the CNMI



Technology investment in
classroom learning

How it All Began



2023



2022

CHRISTINE JACKSON IN PHOTOS OVER THE YEARS

The years 2007, 2008 and 2009 were critical periods for PSS when it began improving its financial management system.

This was the period that the US Department of Education set its sights on the CNMI as it saw its commitment of strengthening its fiscal accountability systems.



2012



2010

AS the “eyes and ears” of the U.S. Department of Education for the territories, Christine Jackson is aware of how the territories’ school districts invest every dollar that the federal government earmarks.

For twenty years now, Christine Jackson, as the senior risk consultant of the USDOE, has seen it all. In particular, she has worked with the CNMI Public School System in successfully navigating stringent requirements for every federal dollar that is earmarked for the Commonwealth’s public school students.

She has seen how PSS managed to extricate itself from risks – as was the case over 20 years ago when PSS began its work towards maintaining a clean federal spending, a status that has continued on to this day.

Today, the level of accountability systems put in place by the PSS has surpassed expectations.

In this recent visit of Jackson, the school district was once again praised. In her own words, “PSS is definitely on track to continue to use the federal investment effectively. I am really pleased.”

The Public School System receives less federal money compared to the other territories.

The years 2007, 2008 and 2009 were critical periods for PSS when it began improving its financial management system. This was the period that the US Department of Education set its sights on the CNMI as it saw its commitment of strengthening its fiscal accountability systems.

On her fourth visit to the CNMI in 2010, Jackson, according to Students First records, has shown improvements and changes of its fiscal accountability systems.

Thirteen years later, the Public School System, Jackson announced, has successfully maintained and met stringent federal financial management, crediting PSS financial systems to that of the school district leadership... “the caliber of leadership” that provides “stability” in the system.

'VERY IMPRESSIVE USE OF FEDERAL DOLLARS'

IN BELYING 'FALSE REPORTS,' SHE PRAISED FEDERAL PROGRAMS OFFICER JACQUELINE CHE, FINANCE & BUDGET DIRECTOR ARLENE LIZAMA, AND INTERNAL AUDITOR JOLENE MUNA FOR INITIATING STRONG FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

DESPITE the challenges faced by the Public School System – back-to-back supertyphoons, COVID-19 pandemic, and the slowdown of the local economy – it has “very impressively” delivered services to students and its stakeholders using federal dollars,” according to a U.S. Department of Education official that visited Saipan last week.

Christine Jackson, senior risk consultant of the U.S. Department of Education, was on Saipan for a three-day visit from September 18-20. She is considered the “eyes and ears” of the U.S. Department of Education for the territories.

She has been visiting the CNMI, Guam and Puerto Rico for nearly two decades.



Interim Commissioner of Education Donna Flores shows Christine Jackson the federal investment in public education transportation service.



Christine Jackson inspects technology use at MHS library. Principal Jonathan Aguon led the tour. Jackson is joined by Interim Commissioner of Education Donna Flores, FPO Jacqueline Che and Finance Director Arlene Lizama.



Career Preparation Program

Many of the programs offered by the federally funded Career and Technical Education Program of the Public School System continue to prepare public school students with existing local workforce needs, such as the CTE: Woodshop Class of Chacha Oceanview Middle School. During her recent visit, US Department of Education senior risk consultant Christine Jackson, together with Interim Commissioner of Education Donna M. Floress, praised the program and engaged with students Jesse Lin and Aimaan Mustansar.

Her recent visit to the CNMI and Guam was particularly “different”. She visited Guam first, for a critical determination of “whether to remove the territory from high-risk designation and the mandate of a third-party receivership with its federal grants.”

Jackson said her Saipan visit was “to counteract any false narrative about” PSS. Particularly, Jackson cited the issue of PSS’ stability, leadership, use of federal funds, and the level of transparency and accountability on the use of federal grants.

Aside from PSS officials, she also met with leaders from the Board of Education, Northern Marianas College, Northern Marianas Technical Institute, and Governor Arnold I. Palacios and Lt. Governor David M. Apatang.

She also conducted onsite ocular school site visits on

She disclosed the result of her three-day visit in her exit conference with Interim Commissioner of Education Donna M. Flores on September 20.

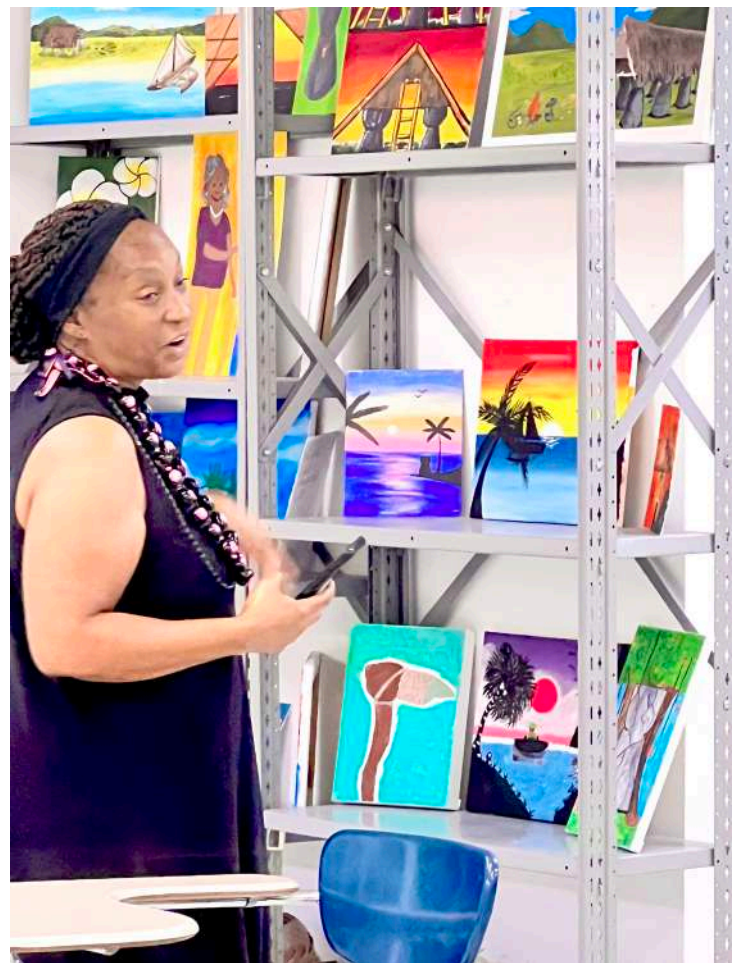
“One thing that makes this visit different is the fact it counteracts any false narratives about what is going on in the CNMI-PSS in terms of the leadership. Even though the leadership has changed recently, and there are new faces in the organization, it definitely was a way to confirm that things are still stable if not even better, because of the caliber of staff who are working with the federal programs, finance area, procurement (and) everything that I have seen and the people I have talked to have been able to be responsive. And everyone has an attitude of transparency, accountability, and integrity in everything that they are doing. And of course, the same singular goal and that they are here for the students,” Jackson said.

“I (was) very pleased that we visited schools and talked to the staff. Things are definitely on par. There is no reason to think that things have gone backward. It definitely has dispelled any rumors about high risk being designated for the school system. I think they are definitely on track to continue to use the federal investment effectively. I am really pleased,” adds Jackson.

“(I am confirming) that PSS is not in a situation that it is coming back to a high risk... the federal funds are protected and being used, and there is no misuse. We couldn't dispute anything. It really was refreshing to see this excitement,” Jackson disclosed.

Jackson also praised Federal Program's Officer Jacqueline Che, Finance, Budget Director Arlene Lizama, and Internal Auditor Jolene Muna for initiating strong financial management within PSS.

“I do have confidence in the folks now in their respective positions. Especially strong federal programs office, and finance, and procurement and internal auditor,” she said.



Praising the artwork of Cha-Cha Middle School students.



Engaging with MHS Principal Jonathan Augon and Vice-Principals Melanie Rdiall and Preston Basa.



Inspecting the Marianas High School Gymnasium.



Inspecting the solar panels and classroom investments at Oleai Elementary School.

'NO QUESTION FEDERAL INVESTMENT HAS BEEN MAXIMIZED'



Who We Are

The Federal Programs Office Department

Jacqueline Che, *Federal Programs Officer*

Elizabeth Romolor, *Administrative Officer*

Michelle Cruz, *Administrative Specialist (Special Projects)*

Marian Tudela, *State Program Officer | Director of Internal Control & Evaluation*

Melisha San Nicolas, *State Program Officer | Director of Equitable Services to PNP & Co-Ombudsman*

Werlly Breakenridge, *Administrative Specialist (Private School Program)*

Bernie Calvo, *Budget Officer*

Nadia Pua, *Deputy Budget Officer*

Marie Quitugua, *Assistant Budget Analyst*

Richelle Castro, *Accountant*

Armie M. Catalla, *Accountant IV (not pictured)*

Peter Arriola, *State Program Officer | Director of Federal Grants Management & Compliance (not pictured)*

Cristina Yohanan, *Title I Coordinator*

COMPARED to Guam and Puerto Rico's school districts, PSS receives much less federal dollars.

And yet according to Christine Jackson, the federal education department's "eyes and ears" for the territories, she was very impressed with how PSS administers federal grants, including the American Rescue Plan (ARP) funding and the Education Stabilization Fund, both totaling to over \$200 million. These grants were awarded to PSS "to help recover learning losses" during the COVID-19 pandemic that led to a global public health emergency.

The Education Stabilization Fund will terminate this year and the American Rescue Plan in 2024.

Annually, PSS receives at least \$30 million in various grants.

"We all went to the valley season for various reasons. But (based on my one-on-one interviews), actual visits and inspection of facilities, absolutely there is no question that the federal investment here has been maximized," Jackson said. "There was no school that I visited where I question that the federal dollar is not being used for their intended program."



THE FEDERAL PROGRAMS OFFICE

The Federal Programs Office (FPO) is the flagship department of the Public School System primarily responsible in overseeing, implementing, and monitoring federal grants

Its vast responsibility includes the planning, application, and coordination of the existing centralized grants management office (system) that is responsible for federal program drawdowns and federal reporting for 20 federal grants with an estimated value of \$48.3 million.

The FPO continues to explore resources to support the direction of growth of the Public School System— these are federal resources that support the Commonwealth's public schools, particularly funds that directly support students' learning and classroom teaching, professional development and growth, infrastructure development, nutrition services, and transportation services, among others.

The Federal Programs Office has established federal grant budget allocations to schools and programs, conducts daily expenditure compliance certification, reports weekly, monthly, quarterly grant expenditures, prepares, and executes daily electronic drawdown of federal funds that are wired to our bank; prepares quarterly and annual program progress reports and conducts periodic school and program monitoring.

FPO also performs additional functions including federal grant identification, development, and application. The Federal Programs Office coordinates relations with federal grantor agencies and NGO and conducts indirect cost negotiations.

In ensuring a high level accountability and financial reporting system, FPO works with the Finance Office and a third party contracted independent auditing firm to ensure that PSS has annual audits that maintains clean opinion on both federal compliance and internal control.



Conducting a tour at Oleai Elementary School's Library

"As a matter of fact, the way they're being used in technology, even the furniture, solar panels on school roofs, even despite the repairs that are still being made by FEMA, the school is still flourishing and continuing to focus on students being served. As I mentioned, it's just refreshing to see the school staff who have been solely laser focused on making sure they are doing what they can for the students and using the federal dollars to do that," she added.

She visited Oleai Elementary School, Chacha Oceanview Middle School, and Marianas High School.

She also conducted a separate visit to Hopwood Middle School.

Aside from Interim Commissioner Flores, held a one-one-one meeting with Federal Programs Officer Jacqueline Che, Finance and Budget Director Arlene Lizama, Procurement Officer Michael Babauta, and Internal Auditor Jolene Muna and Board of Education members.



Interacting with Cha Oceanview Middle School's counselors.



Inspecting Cha-Cha Oceanview Middle School's PPE's, a federal investment to ensure the health and safety of public school students.



A STRONG FINANCIAL SYSTEM

JACKSON said PSS has strong internal controls, particularly with solid financial systems it implements within the Finance and Procurement Departments, showing a strong accountability system that the U.S. Dept. of Education is looking at in every school district in the nation.

“(W)ith (PSS) Finance —you have Ms. Arlene (Lizama), who is (at) the helm. She is coming from the private sector (and) has that background experience. I was very pleased to see that she has just hired a comptroller,” Jackson said.

“With her staff and the new leadership that she has on board, exactly what gives me the sense of comfort is to know that the financials (of PSS) basically everything that they have to do to be accountable for the federal and the local dollars is being led by someone who understands the importance of accountability, and making sure that there are procedures that everyone follows and that is includes the procurement,” she added.

PSS just recently hired Natalia Sablan as its comptroller, and Muna as internal auditor reporting directly to the BOE.

These newly filled positions will continue to

keep PSS “away from cracks” in the financial management and accountability system.

Jackson said it is “critical” that PSS-BOE has its internal auditor to further provide independent internal accountability support with the federal programs and the finance and procurement department.

“Now that’s critical. In light of the fact that I didn’t expect to see an internal auditor on this trip because I thought that position was still vacant, I was very pleasantly surprised to learn that there is an internal auditor who reports to the board but who has also been working hand-in-hand with the finance, federal programs to develop and update any standard operating procedures,” Jackson said.

She added, “(The internal auditor) has already drafted an internal audit workplan so that she can make sure that things are above board, that there is internal control in place across the CNMI Public School System. I think that is going to only be an asset to the system and it is going to give us another comfort level that we have internal audit function that will definitely become something that keeps us (away) from the cracks. I am happy to see that.”

Who We Are

Finance Department

Arlene Lizama, CPA, CGMA, AIF®
Director

Natalia Sablan
Comptroller

Naydine Aquon
Accountant-Payroll

Cathy Regalado
Accountant-Payroll

Remy Matagolai
Accountant-Travel

Ronna Erlich
Accountant-Travel

Elia Santos
Treasurer

Francisca Reyes
Accountant-Accounts Payable

Mercita Alejandre
Accountant - Accounts Payable

Jocelyn Tagabuel
Accountant-Accounts Payable

Marie Montano
Accountant-Accounts Payable

Maegan Agulto
Accountant-Accounts Payable



Finance Department

The school district's Finance department is the principal custodian of public funds earmarked by the CNMI central government.

It has a primary task of managing funds that it receives to ensure that they are sufficiently and equitably made available to the Public School System's largest stakeholder – the over 10,000 public elementary, middle, and high school students – and the over a thousand teaching and non-teaching personnel of the school district.

Guided by its strong, high-level accountability, transparent reporting system and led and managed by a team of highly qualified and trained finance and accounting professionals, the Finance department has successfully managed local dollars with its strict implementation, compliance, and adherence to generally accepted accounting principles and practices.

With the amount of workload, the Finance department has maintained a strong service skill lev-

el, directly working on the needs and services of employees, schools, programs and departments, and the community as a whole with its timely processing of payroll, accounts payable and other accounting transactions required of the department.

To further maintain its productivity level, the Finance department under the tutelage of its director, Arlene Lizama, has begun to transition (implement) in July 2023 the Munis software system, a powerful technology-based accounting system that integrates finance, payroll, human resources, purchasing, and fixed assets. By end of 2023, the PSS Finance department will fully implement leading-edge Munis system.

The implementation of a leading-edge enterprise resource planning system is designed to ensure that PSS operates in the most efficient way, and, at the same time, it is able to maintain accurate records of all of the school district's financial activities to continually meet both local and federal regulations.



Procurement and Supply

Michael Babauta
Procurement and Supply Officer

Lilian Gumba
Inventory Control Manager

Alkantro Sarapio
Inventory and Survey

Melba Villaga
Small Purchases

Leilanie Betevua
Small Purchases

Ana Marie Camacho
Small Purchases

Jess Santos
Receiving and Distribution

Melvin Camacho
Receiving and Distribution

Juan Leon Guerrero
Receiving and Distribution

Juan Cruz
Receiving and Distribution

Vilma Castro
Contract

Magiline Rena
Contracts

WHAT DOES AN INTERNAL AUDITOR DO TO THE SCHOOL DISTRICT?

THE internal auditor is a critical component to the Public School System's financial management systems, according to U.S. Department of Education Senior Risk Consultant Christine Jackson, in acknowledging its valuable function.

The BOE created that position to provide an effective, independent, and objective assessment of internal financial controls of the school district. At the same time, the internal auditor works alongside the Finance department and Federal Programs offices of PSS in identifying opportunities for improvement.

Jolene Muna, MTTRM, CFE, is the newly hired internal auditor for the Public School System. She reports directly to the Board of Education, the policy and governing body of the school district.

Muna, who is currently working on her doctorate degree in public administration, was hired on August 22, 2023. Her hiring was a fulfillment of a critical and missing link of the BOE-PSS' long-standing work of raising the level of accountability systems.

When the BOE created the position in 2010, the internal auditor position was to provide support to the school district in accomplishing its goals as it brings a systematic approach to improving various areas while working independently.

Jackson disclosed that currently the internal auditor, Muna, is already working on an internal audit workplan designed to provide internal controls across the systems—a major requirement by the U.S. Department of Education in all school district's financial risk management plans.

The other of the internal auditor includes: conducting internal audit of fiscal and administrative procedure to ensure compliance with laws, regulations, and policies; provides updates and creates Standard Operating Procedure (SUP); conducts internal audits/reviews by performing specific audit procedure; coordinates annual single audits, prepares and compiles corrective action plans to address the audit finding; assist in responding to the U.S. DOE correspondences within the required time furnish and work with the Fiscal, Personnel and Administration (FPA) Committee and the BOE, as a whole with analysis, recommendations and pertinent comments concerning areas reviewed; completes the audit planning and oversees the audit within established time budgets and deadline dates, ensuring all activities conform to departmental audit procedures; revises and analyzes the effectiveness of the internal audit programs, recommending changes



Internal Auditor Jolene Muna.

and improvements as appropriate; performs specific ad hoc audits; conduct a risk-based audit plan that addresses risks at every level of the district's operations, provide insights about potential risks of proposed changes in PSS operations along and in compliance with the influx of funding from the American Rescue Plan Act; review and advise all procurement contracts; periodic monitoring in areas recommended in the Internal Administrative Controls, and provide BOE-FPA Committee a month-to-month update/report on critical areas identified in need of improvement/non-compliance/irregularities.



US Department of Education Senior Risk Consultant Christine Jackson, center, is flanked by Governor Arnold I. Palacios, Lt. Governor David M. Apatang, and the commonwealth's education leaders: Interim Commissioner of Education Donna M. Flores, Northern Marianas College President Dr. Galvin Deleon Guerrero, NMC Vice President Frankie Eliptico, NMTECH Chief Executive Officer Jodina Attao, CNMI Board of Education Vice Chairman Herman Atalig, and PSS officials.

US DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION CONFIDENT IN INTERIM COMMISSIONER DONNA FLORES LEADERSHIP

SPECIAL Education Program Director Donna M. Flores' appointment as interim commissioner of education was praised by the visiting U.S. Department of Education official, adding that her federal counterparts in the Special Education Program attests to her "genuine connection to students".

As the "eyes and ears" of the US Dept. of Education for all territories for the last 20 years, Jackson visited Saipan on September 22.

Jackson said Flores' federal counterparts in the Special Education Program attests to her "genuine connection to students."

The Board of Education appointed Flores as interim education chief effective September 1. She has been the Special Education Program director since 2020. She has been with the program for nearly 14 years now.

The PSS Special Education Program is one of the two largest federal programs of the school district.

During her courtesy meeting with Governor Arnold I. Palacios and Lt. Governor David M. Apatang, and in the presence of Northern Marianas College and Northern Marianas Technical Institute officials, Jackson said:

"Having someone with a heart as interim commissioner, I am confident of this leadership. Kudos to that. You have good education leadership in the CNMI. Donna Flores is going to be a good leader. I am confident of her leadership because I have worked with her folks in (Washington, D.C.'s) Special Education Program and they told me about her," Jackson said.

In a follow-up interview, the visiting federal official disclosed that the Office of Special Education Program in the nation's capital has spoken highly of and complemented Flores for her appointment as interim PSS commissioner of education.

"I mean to be honest, every time our Special Education folks complement someone, it definitely speaks well because they are very particular about folks following Special Education rules and regulations. And it was great to see that someone from that office is taking on the leadership role, even if it's in the interim state, because she has genuine connection to the students especially to students with special needs. The fact that she is there now, I'm sure that it's definitely going to be a great stint of leadership because she understands what needed to happen both on the Board (level) and the staff that worked with her at the central office and at the school level," Jackson said.

Meet Your Interim Commissioner of Education

Donna Moore Flores, the current Director of Special Education Program of the CNMI Public School System, has been appointed Interim Commissioner of Education by the State Board of Education effective September 2.

Flores holds a master's degree in education law with concentration in K-12 (cum laude) from Shepard Broad College of Law- Nova Southeastern University, Florida, and a bachelor's degree in education with concentration in Rehabilitative Human Services from the Northern Marianas College.

"My gratitude and appreciation to our BOE members for their trust. It was not an easy decision for me to accept this appointment, and, because we have urgent tasks ahead of us, I was assured by our policymakers of their support in our work to be able to deliver what is expected of us," Interim Commissioner Flores said in a statement.

With the growing diverse PSS community, the interim commissioner of education adds: "We will continue working with our education leaders, advocates, parents and families in providing optimum educational services to our students."

PSS provides services to Head Start/ Early Head Start, Early Intervention, special education, elementary, middle, and high school students.

The Special Education Program is the single largest program under PSS, with its stakeholders accounting for about 11 percent of the overall PSS student population, and its employees representing 21 percent of PSS total workforce.

Under Director Flores' tutelage, the PSS Special Education Program administers one of the school district's largest federal grants. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B Formula Grants assists states and school districts in providing a free appropriate education in the least restrictive environment for children with disabilities, ages 3 through 21.

PSS-SPED has continuously managed the \$6.2 million IDEA Part B Formula Grant with a high level of accountability, findings of consecutive external audits have indicated.

Director Flores has demonstrated her commitment to community development and public service through her years of impactful involvement and connections such as a disabilities advocate, a notary public, council memberships, and other activities.

Of her more than 25 years in public service, she has spent nearly 14 years with the PSS Special Education Program. She started her career as a personnel specialist and recruiter, and eventually was appointed as personnel and compliance program manager.

In 2020, she was appointed as interim director for the PSS Special Education Program following the passing of her mentor, long-time educator Suzanne Wilson Lizama. She served for nearly a year until her full appointment in 2021 by then-Commissioner of Education Dr. Ada.

She added, "She is one who wants to make sure she is accountable for the federal funds."

At the same time, Jackson also praised the appointment of Jacqueline "Jackie" Che as the PSS Federal Programs Officer. She succeeded her mentor, Tim Thornburgh, who retired last year.

Che was interim FPO until her full appointment last July.

Thornburgh hired Che two years ago as the Federal Program Office's Director of Internal Control and Evaluation.

"There is a solid system in place for federal programs. As you know, we have been working with Tim Thornburgh for a long time and he has successfully passed the baton to Jackie Che," the federal official said.

"I think both (Special Education Program and the Federal Programs Office of PSS) are under very good leadership. I feel very comfortable that they are going to achieve all the goals that are in their approved (federal grants) applications," said Jackson.

Jackson will return to the nation's capital confident that PSS will continue to maintain its status as one of the school districts with strong financial management systems.

"I spoke to everyone who is leading those efforts and they all work together. There is not any splintered leadership. Everyone seems to work very well together to make sure that they have a common goal and that so that CNMI PSS looks good and is operating effectively. I was happy to see that," she said.

Interim Commissioner of Education Donna M. Flores introduces the members of the Board of Education comprised by Chairman Antonio L. Borja, Vice Chairman Herman Atalig, Secretary-Treasurer Gregory Borja, Board Member Andrew Orsini, Teacher Rep. Dr. Dora Miura and Non-Public School Rep. Dr. Ron Snyder, and PSS leaders to visiting US Dept. of Education official Christine Jackson.



U.S. DOE CONSULTANT VOWS TO ADDRESS DELAY OF HOPWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL REBUILDING



DESCRIBING as ‘disservice’ to public school students, raises issue with US DOE Secretary Cardona.

U.S. Department of Education’s Senior Risk Consultant Christine Jackson has brought to Secretary Miguel Cardona’s attention the delay in the reconstruction of Hopwood Middle School, five years after it was supposed to be condemned following the 2018 super typhoon Yutu’s aftermath.

Jackson made an ocular visit to the campus, the largest public middle school in the CNMI, during her three-day visit in September. She was accompanied by Interim Commissioner of Education Donna M. Flores.

In separate meetings with the members of the Board of Education, and Governor Arnold I. Palacios and Lt. Gov. David M. Apatang, Jackson shared her observation and disheartened she was by the state of Hopwood Middle School.

Jackson was told that the delay is caused by issues within the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The reconstruction and rebuilding of Hopwood Middle School is FEMA-funded.

The delay is a “disservice” to CNMI public school students and is “unacceptable”, she lamented.

“To be very honest, because I have been coming out here so long and I visited many of the schools, and I distinctly remember visiting Hopwood Middle (School) on one of the visits and on the drive-by to that school this time and see the condition of those buildings, and realized that it had not been condemned but there are actually students and teachers going into that building in the condition that it’s in was very disheartening,” Jackson told Students First in a separate interview.

“But then, to further learn that this has been going on for 5 years and the various cadre of students who have been disserved: they have not received full-day schedules (instruction) because they been unable to use the buildings, because it still lacks the facilities for them to be especially prepared. And that, for me, is unacceptable, because children should not be at the disposal of the adults not having their act together. And that really stems from people not taking responsibility for prioritizing getting these repairs done in a timely manner. And I think we have to go back, step back to what the priority is—and the priority should be that students’ facilities need to be priority number one and it should not be take five (5) years or more to fix the school buildings so that kids can easily transfer to the next level prepared. And there have been students who have been in that situation for over five (5) years who have been documented as not being prepared for high school and needing remedial help—and that’s not their fault,” the federal education senior risk consultant added.

She disclosed to Students First that she had already immediately informed Education Secretary Cardona of the situation.

“I actually have (brought up to Secretary Cardona). I did send an email to the Secretary’s adviser, and I noted that I am here (on Saipan and personally saw the condition of Hopwood Middle School). Once you’ve seen it and you have noted it personally, you can’t ignore it. As an education department, I definitely had to at least put it on his radar. To what extent we can make a difference remains to be seen. But I think a conversation does (need) at a higher level to figure out why these delays exist and why students are still not being served. That’s the part that really is disturbing for me,” she added.

36 PSS Students Earn Distinctions As AP Scholar Awards



John Paul Garcia



Aisha Erica M. Lansangan



Jun Da Li



Andrew Bailey Sunderland



Jessie Lyn Reyes

(PSS) - The CNMI Public School System is thrilled to recognize 36 outstanding students who have showcased exceptional college-level proficiency by excelling in multiple Advanced Placement (AP) Exams.

"Our CNMI public high schools proudly offer a diverse range of both in-person and online AP courses, affording students a remarkable opportunity to immerse themselves in collegiate-level coursework. AP courses empower students to take on academic challenges and are designed to equip them with skills and knowledge to excel in higher education," Instructional Technology and Distance Education Program Director Lorraine Catienza said in announcing the distinction to public school students.

Many colleges and universities in the United States and around the world offer credit or advanced placement to students who score well on AP exams.

The College Board recognizes several levels of achievement based on student performance on AP exams and courses.

The AP Scholar award is granted to students who receive scores of 3 or higher on three or more AP Exams.

The AP Scholar with Honor recognition is granted to students who receive an average score of at least 3.25 on all AP Exams taken, and scores of 3 or higher on four or more of these exams.

Four of Saipan Southern High Schools AP scholars are, seated, counterclockwise, Ye Z. Sablan, Shamira Sulayman, Danielle Formalejo, and Gracie Reign Mendiola. The other MHS AP school



Three of Marianas High School's AP scholars are, from left to right, Jedric Anicieto, Pony Tang, and Gwanpil Son.



The AP Scholar with Distinction is granted to students who receive an average score of at least 3.5 on all AP Exams taken, and scores of 3 or higher on five or more of these exams.

The AP International Diploma awarded to students who display exceptional achievement across a variety of disciplines

The AP Seminar and Research Certificate is granted to students who earn scores of 3 or higher in both AP Seminar and AP Research.

The following 23 students garnered the AP Scholar Award: Iris Bae (Marianas High School), Christine Byen (MHS), Mary Grace Caras (MHS), Gericho Conge (MHS), Matthew Ernest (MHS), Conall Hartig (MHS), Sara Keaton (MHS), Fei Fei Lei (MHS), Sydney Lim (MHS), Koey Pan (MHS), Bomee Park (MHS), Jayden Shin (MHS), Gwanpil Son (MHS), Jaehoon Son (MHS), Daniel Song (MHS), Brigit Len Tabuena (MHS), Danielle Formalejo (Saipan Southern High School), John Paul Garcia (SSHS), Aisha Lansangan (SSHS), Junda Li (SSHS), Gracie Reign Mendiola (SSHS), Jessie Lynn Reyes (SSHS), and Shamira Sulyman (SSHS).

The following nine students garnered the AP Scholar with Honor

Award: Jedric Aniciete (MHS), Mylan Goodwin (MHS), Joseph Victor Jimenez (MHS), John Paul Labadan (MHS), Juruel Neilan Magtalas (MHS), Pony Tang (MHS), Zenn Tomokane (MHS), Ye Z. Sablan (SSHS), and Andrew Bailey Sunderland (SSHS).

The following four students garnered the AP Scholar with Distinction Award: Carson Lin (MHS), Angel Ren (MHS), Anastasiia Shamanaeva (MHS), and Yiwen Zha (MHS).

The following student garnered the AP International Diploma: Angel Ren (MHS)

The following five students garnered the AP Seminar and Research Certificate: Danielle Formalejo (SSHS), Aisha Lansangan (SSHS), Jessie Lynn Reyes (SSHS), Ye Z. Sablan (SSHS), and Shamira Sulyman (SSHS).

Last May, 328 CNMI PSS Advanced Placement students combined to take a total 477 AP exams across various subject areas: Biology, Calculus, Chinese Language and Culture, Computer Science, English Language & Composition, English Literature & Composition, Human Geography, Japanese Language and Culture, Macroeconomics, Microeconomics, Physics, Psychology, Research, Seminar, Statistics, U.S. Government & Politics, and World History. Traditionally, about 20 percent of approximately two million students worldwide who take AP Exams perform at a sufficiently high level to earn an AP Scholar Award.

The CNMI Public School System congratulates these students on their exceptional achievements and wishes continued success to those who have graduated from high school. PSS looks forward to continued academic celebrations for students who are currently taking AP courses this school year.

The following 23 students garnered the AP Scholar Award:

MHS

Iris Bae (MHS), Christine Byen (MHS), Mary Grace Caras (MHS), Gericho Conge (MHS), Matthew Ernest (MHS), Conall Hartig (MHS), Sara Keaton (MHS), Fei Fei Lei (MHS), Sydney Lim (MHS), Koey Pan (MHS), Bomee Park (MHS), Jayden Shin (MHS), Gwanpil Son (MHS), Jaehoon Son (MHS), Daniel Song (MHS), Brigit Len Tabuena (MHS), Jedric Aniciete (MHS), Mylan Goodwin (MHS), Joseph Victor Jimenez (MHS), John Paul Labadan (MHS), Juruel Neilan Magtalas (MHS), Pony Tang (MHS), Zenn Tomokane (MHS), Carson Lin (MHS), Angel Ren (MHS), Anastasiia Shamanaeva (MHS), and Yiwen Zha (MHS).
Angel Ren (MHS)

SSHS

Danielle Formalejo (SSHS), John Paul Garcia (SSHS), Aisha Lansangan (SSHS), Junda Li (SSHS), Gracie Reign Mendiola (SSHS), Jessie Lynn Reyes (SSHS), and Shamira Sulyman (SSHS).
Ye Z. Sablan (SSHS), Andrew Bailey Sunderland (SSHS), Danielle Formalejo (SSHS), Aisha Lansangan (SSHS), Jessie Lynn Reyes (SSHS), Ye Z. Sablan (SSHS), and Shamira Sulyman (SSHS).



CNMI SLDS team taking a break from countless hours of grant writing.



NMTech and Department of Labor

CNMI SLDS AWARDED FY'23 GRANT OF \$4 MILLION TO SUPERCHARGE DATA WAREHOUSE



Northern Marianas College and Adult Business Education



CNMI Scholarship Office



SHEFA

Director of Regional Education Laboratory Pacific; Leila Staffler, Secretary of the Department of Labor; Frances Torres, Director for the Workforce Investment Agency Division; Jodina Attao, Chief Executive Officer for the Northern Marianas Technical Institute; Mildred Sablan, Director for the CNMI Scholarship Office; and Justin Andrew, Director of the Department of Commerce.

She further expanded the key objectives of the FY2023 SLDS Grant:

Goal 1: Expand the current eMPowerED system from a P-12 to a P-20W SLDS. This expansion will create a seamless educational data ecosystem, extending from early childhood through postsecondary education and into the workforce, ensuring a holistic view of student progress.

Goal 2: Utilize data analytics to derive meaningful insights from the expanded P20W data set. Data analytics will play a pivotal role in extracting valuable insights, aiding educators, policymakers, and stakeholders in data-driven decision-making.

The FY2023 SLDS grant builds upon the success of the FY2019 SLDS grant, which led to the development of the eMPowerED system. The eMPowerED system has served as a repository of five years of historical student, school, and program data from preschool through 12th grade. It has empowered CNMI educators with valuable insights, supporting local and federal reporting requirements, identifying at-risk students, and enabling continuous improvement planning at the classroom, school, and district levels.

The CNMI SLDS team, comprised of five members, eagerly embarks on this transformative project, making efficient use of grant. Jeaniffer Cubangbang, the SLDS technical manager, anticipates team expansion, supported by the grant's allocation of two new technical hires. This expansion is vital for enhancing interoperability, elevating data quality, and strengthening system infrastructure. With this grant and the addition of new technical staff, partner agencies will harness the new data infrastructure and relationships to address critical challenges. The expanded implementation of the eMPowerED system will enrich user experiences, benefiting students, schools, postsecondary education, workforce training programs, and the broader workforce. This includes invaluable partners like NMC, NMTech, the Department of Labor, the Department of Commerce, and others, ultimately leading to improved technology and enhanced interoperability.

About CNMI SLDS:

The CNMI SLDS is a pivotal tool to bridge the gap between information and action, enhancing student outcomes. The mission of the CNMI SLDS Program is transforming education with the power of data.

For more information about CNMI SLDS and its initiatives, go to <https://slds.cnmipss.org/>

Dr. Annette Pladevega-Sablan, CNMI SLDS Project Director, expressed excitement about the grant, stating, "This grant is a significant milestone that will revolutionize our data systems. We are committed to harnessing the power of data." She is also grateful to partners in the CNMI. She is thankful that letters of support for the grant proposal include endorsements from PSS Commissioner of Education; Dr. Galvin Deleon Guerrero, the President of the Northern Marianas College; Dr. Christina Tydeman,



Interim Commissioner of Education and current Special Education Program Director Donna M. Flores speaks about the State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG): Project Higai.

ONE OF FIVE IN NATION: PSS SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM AWARDED 5-YEAR GRANT

CNMI Public School System facilitated an in-person stakeholder session to launch its newly awarded US Department of Education- Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) five-year State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG): Project Higai.

The PSS-SPED Program's Project Higai is only one of five in the nation to have been awarded the five-year grant.

With partners from the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) and the University of Guam Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research, and Service (UOG CEDDERS), CNMI PSS Project Higai Director shared the purpose of Project Higai and engaged over 30 participants in providing input on how the project can identify and involve stakeholders. The October 6 participants included the PSS Board Chair; Key Management administrators; State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) school administrators; Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) representatives; Special Education State Advisory Panel (SESAP) members representing the disability network, parents, special education teachers, and private schools; and collaborating agency and partner, CNMI Division of Youth Services and the CNMI Parent Information and Training (PTI) Program administrator.



CNMI Board of Education Chairman Antonio L. Borja represented the policy and governing body of PSS in the State Professional Development.



Dr. Joanne Cashman speaks during the State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG): Project Higai stakeholders professional development.



Effective October 1, 2023 – September 30, 2028, Project Higai will implement an effective, efficient, and sustainable professional development delivery system to improve its capacity to apply evidence-based professional development practices for improving educational results for children with disabilities. Project Higai incorporates the evidence-based professional development components through an authentic engagement approach in developing and implementing high quality professional development through the use of technology.

In Chamorro, Higai (pronounced hee-guy) means “woven palm leaves” used in traditional thatched roofing. Project Higai therefore serves as the catalyst for crafting meaningful professional development by weaving in various nationally-recognized resources and expertise with local stakeholders and expertise to create relevant, useful, and sustainable special education content for providing special education and related services in CNMI’s island communities.

Specifically, Project Higai will improve educational results of children with disabilities through: (a) promoting a stakeholder-responsive system that engages administrators, special educators, general educators, partner agency/organization representatives, and families to ensure professional development translates to improved practice and better outcomes for students with disabilities; (b) expanding the current professional development delivery system by increasing the use of technology to deliver evidence-based professional development designed to improve specially designed instruction that results in high-quality educational programs; and (c) preparing and supporting a cadre of professionals as implementation support practitioners (ISPs) who are united in modeling and supporting their peers on the use of the evidence-based professional development delivery system.

Drawing on the work of OSEP investments in professional development and research to practice, PSS will develop a more holistic approach in partnership with two nationally recognized organizations, the regional Institution of Higher Education, and CNMI’s local support agencies and councils representing parents of children with disabilities.

Project Higai’s partnerships include NASDSE, the nationally-recognized organization for special education leaders, to promote more authentic engagement across stakeholders, inclusive of special educators, general educators, and families. The partnership with American Institutes for Research (AIR) and its OSEP-funded centers, PROGRESS Center and the National Center on Intensive



June Deleon of Guam CEDDERS, Dr. Joanne Cashman, Interim Commissioner of Education Donna M. Flores and Board of Education Chairman Antonio Borja.

Intervention, will enable significant improvements and focus on special education content in PSS’s technology-based professional development system. The partnership with UOG CEDDERS will provide the on-site facilitation in support of project implementation, evaluation, and dissemination processes. The partnership with CNMI’s PTI Program, SESAP, PSS PAC, and other family serving groups will bring the family voice to Project Higai and enable the outreach to families. These groups have the relationship to draw families into this work and support their active and ongoing engagement.

For more information, please contact Project Higai Director, Donna Flores, Interim Commissioner of Education, PSS at donna.flores@cnmipss.org.