

MASCOT COMPLAINT STATEMENT

Based on the wording of Act 152 of 2022, the Vermont State Agency of Education (AOE) created a process of educating school boards to use an AOE-created model school mascot policy, but it also gave boards the option to create their own. In prioritizing local control over any impact of the law as enacted, there is no room for accountability or monitoring. There is no oversight. Ultimately, the law as interpreted by AOE allows only for discussion and decisions to be kept in the hands of those unqualified to identify the racism, appropriation and denigration of people who have been dehumanized for centuries. It is imperative that stronger language be enacted in Vermont state law to prohibit any state agency from further complicating the main objective: to keep all children safe.

Future examination of this law **must** include input and guidance from individuals qualified in cultural humility and history of impacted communities throughout the entire decision-making processes. The idea that “tradition” must be preserved at the cost of moving forward to acknowledge the truths and existence of other people, is deleterious. At what cost? Traditions such as these mascots that perpetuate white supremacy are forcibly counter to evolution.

Judy Dow and Mia Schultz inadvertently tested the School Mascot (Act 152) Law, and it has failed. School districts have been tasked with this decision for decades, and they have failed. That is why legislation was introduced in the first place. To put this back in the purview of school districts defeats the purpose and the basis of the law, which is to ensure “all Vermont students should feel safe and welcome while enrolled in a Vermont school.”

In a letter originally submitted to the AOE on January 31, 2023, Judy Dow, Executive Director of Gedakina, and Mia Schultz, President of the Rutland Area National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), identified fifteen public schools that violate the goals of this law. They were met with arduous processes that required them to appeal to individual local school districts, each with different policies requiring in-person meetings and formal presentations.

Ms. Dow and Ms. Schultz have consistently been part of this legislative history. They have provided testimony, written letters to the legislation and AOE, and have been active advocates for removing harmful mascots, imagery and language through their conversations and interactions with legislators and others. They have also organized educational sessions on stereotypes and bias that are recorded and archived for all with internet access.

Ms. Dow has been an educator for over 38 years, is of Abenaki and French Canadian descent, and leads an Indigenous organization that works with women and their families throughout New England to help them self-determine a good path in life.

Ms. Schultz, who is a mixed-race Black woman descended from enslaved people, is trained in identifying discriminatory practices through the nation’s oldest and largest civil rights organization.

Both have been deeply invested in righting this simple and basic wrong; the AOE has disregarded their expertise by not including them as the stakeholders outlined in Act 152. AOE has instead enacted a policy that does not actually meet the intent of Act 152, but rather maintains the status quo which is wrought with white supremacy, and prohibits actual progress toward the intent of the law.

“It is the intent of the General Assembly to ensure that all Vermont schools provide positive and inclusive learning environments for all students by eliminating the use of discriminatory school branding, which undermines the educational experiences of members of all communities and perpetuates negative stereotypes. All Vermont students should feel safe and welcome while enrolled in a Vermont school.”

These are the opening remarks of Act 152: An act relating to nondiscriminatory school branding, enacted July 1, 2022.

The law, and the subsequently developed model policy, prohibit “school branding that directly or indirectly references or stereotypes the likeness, features, symbols, traditions, or other characteristics that are specific to either: (A) the race, creed, color, national origin, sexual orientation, or gender identity of any person or group of persons; or (B) any person, group of persons, or organization associated with the repression of others.”

The consequence of the resulting AOE policy now in place, instead of placing any corrective burden on school districts, burdens individuals with expertise, like Ms. Dow and Ms. Schultz, to defend themselves at each individual school district from those with limited knowledge and no lived and trained experience in this area. As a result, the intentionally convoluted policy, coupled with problematic press coverage, has now exposed both leaders to endure a deluge of hateful and harmful rhetoric. This limits others from pursuing complaints in fear of retaliation.

Vermont is in the process of reckoning with its past and its current reality of discrimination through the adoption of the Truth and Reconciliation law. It is imperative that the processes such as that which was enacted by the AOE and the Vermont Legislative body be examined and reckoned with in order to prevent the harm that has come to two women of color, leaders who are advocating for this state to become hate-free by eradicating images that denigrate and appropriate other cultures and people and perpetuate violence. Images, symbols and language profoundly affect childhood development and how children see and experience the world. Removal of damaging images, symbolism and language enshrouded in violent and racist histories is an easy way to begin the process of ensuring that all children feel safe as Act 152 states.

Mia Schultz, Rutland Area NAACP

Judy Dow, Gedakina

Rep. Kevin Coach Christie

Rep. Elizabeth Burrows, Windsor-1 and Chair, Mount Ascutney School District

Rep. Golrang (Rey) Garofano, Chittenden-23

Wafic Faour, Vermonters for Justice in Palestine

Hope Sullivan
Ann Shroeder
Alex Hilliard, VT AthletaFit
Rep. Daisy Berbeco
Charlene Galarneau
Marcia Daoudi
Rep. Angela Arsenault
Jen Daniels
Meghan Rigali
Kathleen Voigt Walsh
Rep. Esme Cole
Amy Rose
Sharon Randall, Fairfax Neighbors for Racial Equity
Cameron Caruso-Randall, Franklin County Fairfax Neighbors for Racial Equity
Kathleen Olwell
Susan M. Buckholz
Rep. Emma Mulvaney-Stanek
Heather Starzynski, NeighborWorks of Western Vermont
Malcolm Greene, SEC's Black Affinity Space
Rep. Edye Graning
Rep. Jubilee McGill
Rep. Leslie Goldman
Rep. David Templeman
Rep. Leonora Dodge
Julie Tessier, Vermont Care Partners: VT Council
Pat Autilio
Rep. Bobby Farlice-Rubio
Dr. Mary M. Gannon, Vice President, Windham County NAACP
Leah Skye Summerfield, Gedakina
Rep. Alyssa Black
Lynn Murphy, Act 1 working group, educator (The Mountain School) Abenaki, teacher trainer,
Board member of Gedakina and former science network educator
Rep. Ela Chapin
Abbie Corse
Shela Linton, The Root Social Justice Center
Sen. Irene Wrenner
Kakendasot Mattena, Gedakina
Kit Harrington
Michelle Boleski
Dr. Mary M. Gannon, Vice President, Windham County NAACP
Migrant Justice / Justicia Migrante

John & Shanti McKenna, Clarendon
Melinda Humphrey
Jane Bourhill
Monika Ganguly-Kiefner, Clarendon
Nadia Cox, Pawlet