

Dear Senate Education Committee,

As a group of students, alumni, and community members of Vermont schools who have grappled with Native-themed mascots for decades, More Than A Mascot strongly supports bill S.139. Native mascots harm indigenous students and community members. Native mascots continue a culture that perpetuates the invisibility of and lack of empathy for Indigenous people and unjustifiably subjugates Indigenous people to protracted fights over their humanity. We have personally seen these effects in action, and we have seen how prolonged, bitter schoolboard fights amplify this harm. Local mascot fights are brutal and unnecessary.

Over the past two years in Vermont, we have seen Indigenous and student-equity-minded organizations across the state come out in favor of retiring Native mascots. In July 2020, we saw the Vermont Principals' Association issued a directive asking schools with mascots, nicknames, symbols, or logos with marginalizing, racist, or exclusionary elements be replaced. In January 2021, the [Vermont Racial Equity Task Force](#) submitted a report to Governor Scott recommending that the Board of Education create a model policy on culturally inappropriate mascots, as S.139 proposes to do. We have seen the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs commend schools who have voluntarily stopped using mascots, logos, symbols. Additionally, Indigenous leaders and professional organizations across the country have called for change for decades.

We have also seen communities torn apart in the effort to end the era of harmful mascots. It is time that the state takes steps to show its values, to align on the right side of this issue as several other states have done and more will do in the coming years, and to help guide local communities to ensure schools are as welcoming and safe a place as possible based on what we know today.

Given that testimony was recently heard from two Abenaki individuals on the bill, who are also Vermont residents, and that their testimony demonstrated support for legislation like S.139 to move forward, we would like to respectfully issue a caution to the committee about hearing testimony from representatives of Indigenous groups from outside the Vermont and New England regions. When hearing from individuals representing groups from other states and regions, curiosity should be sparked about the reasons others would be interested in the situation in Vermont, especially if that testimony doesn't run in line with what Abenaki individuals have put forward. Hearing from different viewpoints is important, but decisions like this one should prioritize the input of minority groups most locally relevant. Native voices in our communities have a history of being ignored on this and other issues by those in power - don't let them be silenced now.

We have an extensive collection of resources on our website that are relevant to many aspects of the mascot issue at www.morethanamascotvt.org/resources. If there are additional resources that could be helpful to members of the committee, please don't hesitate to ask, as our group members have combed through many resources and news stories since coming together in 2020.

Thank you for your service to better the educational experiences of all Vermont youth,
More Than A Mascot

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<https://www.morethanamascotvt.org/>