

Dear Representative Webb,

I **strongly support passage of S. 139** relating to the public schools' team mascots/branding bill, which is now before the House Education Committee.

### **Justification for the Danville School Board Policy**

In my capacity as a Danville School Board Director, I wrote and supported the Danville Board's policy (attached pdf) retiring the School's "Indians" mascot/name/logo in April of 2021. In that policy I was explicit, and the Danville Board agreed, that the reasons for the retirement were (1) issues of community divisiveness, (2) harm directly to Native Americans and the tacit endorsement of stereotyping of them by others, and (3) a fundamental incompatibility with the mission of the school, which emphasizes how we are expected to treat one another.

### **Harm matters, not offensiveness**

I wish to briefly call to your attention to reason (2) above - harm, which for me was most persuasive. Much the mascot debate in the popular press and notably so in legislative committees has focused on the issue of "offensiveness", as it is a term to which everyone can have a credible opinion. Offensiveness is fleeting and rarely consequential. In contrast in law, medicine, and ethics, historically and currently, there is a clear distinction between "harmful" and "offensive", with "harm" being the more egregious. But if you view "harm" only as a Red-Badge-of-Courage-type of harm, where a sign of physical damage is required, then claims of harm from "offensiveness" largely fall hollow.

### **Harm claims are about developmental mental health and identity**

Such a stance ignores the *scientifically well-documented harm* that results from interference with the positive identity-building development of school-age children -- with their mental, psychological, social and emotional health -- with what psychologists would call their fruitful exploration of "possible selves." If you read the supporting documents for mascot/logo/name retirement by the American Psychological Association, the American Sociological Association and others, the word of choice in justifying retirement in those documents is "harm", not "offensiveness." "Harm" has no red badge here, but in the words of a former Native American Danville student testifying before our board, it is manifest in the damage and pain of "silent sufferers", who have experienced stereotyping.

### **A respectful request for diligence**

So, as your committee proceeds I am confident there will be ample testimony about "offensiveness." But the claim that stereotyping causes and promotes harm is scientifically testable, and many such tests have been conducted. A Google Scholar search using the terms "stereotyping and child development and native americans and harm" (taken as an overlapping set) returns about 19,500 papers addressing this joint topic between 2000-2022. In drafting the Danville policy I read probably about 200 of these, but even though I am a professional biologist, I am by no means the expert here, and I relied heavily on those who are. Fortunately, testifying on S. 139 to the Senate Education Committee on February 10, 2022 was Dr. Laurel R. Davis-Delano (Springfield College, MA), who is such an expert. I urge you to read her testimony and, especially, the copy of a paper\* she co-authored with Dr. Stephanie A. Fryberg (University of Michigan), a well-recognized leader in this field, and Dr. Joseph P. Gone (Harvard Medical School); the paper was submitted to the Senate Committee as the first agenda item on February 10th. Their paper's summary noted that

*The findings from academic research on the effects of Native American mascots suggest that regardless of the stated intent of those who support Native mascots (i.e., to 'honor' Native Americans) and regardless of opinions about them, these mascots induce or correlate with negative psychosocial outcomes.*

Please ask participants point-blank what they know about harm and these topics and how they know it. Many, if not most, participants in the legislative discussions are unaware such a body of scientific studies exists and its strength, so these studies do not readily inform committee discussions. I urge you to a diligence that assures that the voice of the scientific community on this subject is heard in your deliberations and receives appropriate weight in your decisions.

**US Army recruiting slogan of 1980s and 1990s captures the mission perfectly**

Most of us have pledged allegiance to the flag and Republic many times, and each time we did so, we committed to "liberty and justice for all." In the educational community that means **all our kids**. Every parent brings their children to the schoolhouse door with the same expectation: that they will have the liberty and guidance to develop to "Be the best that they can be" - as a civil right. The scientific evidence supports the claim that Indian-themed mascots/logos/names handicap pursuit of that right.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and for your service to our community

Respectfully,

Robert K. Edgar  
Danville (VT) School Board Director (2017-March 1,2022)

**Attachment.** Danville School Board Policy DB001: School Symbols: mascots, names, nicknames, images and other symbols. Adopted 6 April 2021

\* Laurel R. Davis-Delano , Joseph P. Gone & Stephanie A. Fryberg (2020) The psychosocial effects of Native American mascots: a comprehensive review of empirical research findings, *Race Ethnicity and Education* 23:(4) 613-633. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1772221>