

I am the current Chair of the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs (VCNAA) and we have discussed the issue of ethnic school mascots many times over the past few years. The VCNAA has issued the following statement:

“The Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs recognizes the historical and present intolerance, bias, and racism caused by ‘Indian’ mascots, logos, and symbols. These images, words, symbols, and the behavior that accompanies them perpetuate negative stereotypes of indigenous peoples, resulting in significant psychological, social, and cultural consequences, especially for indigenous youth.

The VCNAA commends the many sports teams and schools which have voluntarily chosen to stop using these mascots, logos, and symbols. VCNAA also supports the many individuals and organizations working to educate Vermont’s residents on the harm they cause. These actions pave the way for a future in which indigenous youth can proudly embrace their culture, history, and heritage.”

However, the additional testimony I am providing today is not in my role as Chair of the VCNAA, but as a member of the Abenaki community. I believe no group of people should ever be used as a mascot. In the cases where mascots depicting Native Americans are used in Vermont, they have historically negative connotations. We were not raiders, but defenders of our homeland. We were not “Indians”, but Alnombak, The People. We had leaders, but they were not “Chieftains”. Using such names are not honoring us, but instead are both misleading and perpetuate the myth that we no longer exist except in times long past.

How detrimental can such depictions be? One parent shared the story of attending a school sporting event and hearing the chant “Kill the Indians” over and over, to see the tomahawk chop over and over, and explained how distressing it was to witness. This should give everyone pause to consider the implications. Is this the message we want to send our children?

I have also heard the argument that removing these harmful mascots will mean that we as a People will disappear, that others will not remember our existence. Yet despite the wars and disease brought here by others, the forced assimilation and genocide sanctioned by legislation, we are still here and still a vibrant People.

I am disheartened at how contentious the issue of such “Indian mascots” has been and continues to be. Some communities have become divided over whether to continue using them or to choose a new one. It is also disheartening to see the hard work, consideration and thought students and others have put into their efforts to change one name and then to have it reverted to the old. It seems apparent that when left to communities with their local control over ethnic mascots and names, it will never be resolved... they can be reverted or new ethnic mascots can be introduced and used.

Given this, please consider passing the legislation to ban ethnic school mascots.

Sincerely,
Carol McGranaghan
Abenaki