

Dear Senate Committee,

I am writing to voice my support for Senate Bill S.139, which would end the use of ethnic themed mascots in Vermont schools. I am so encouraged to see that Vermont is making this a priority, and I thank you for hearing testimony about this important issue.

I have been an educator in Vermont for the past 20 years. During the past 15 years, I have also been living in a community with a Native Themed mascot, the Green Mountain Union High School Chieftain. I am extremely concerned about the stereotypical symbology and negative behavior that is associated with these mascots in our community and local school. In fact, I did not consider GMUHS as an option for my own son because of the mascot. After working with students at Chester and Rutland who were working on this issue, I am convinced that a bill eliminating these stereotypical mascots throughout the state is needed to stop the negative discourse and community behavior that this debate is creating at the local level. Students are being harmed by the stereotypical mascot, but they are also being targeted for speaking out on this issue. Finally, all students are being harmed by the lack of Indigenous educational resources that has led to this lack of empathy for those being most harmed by these mascots.

Around the country schools and professional sports teams are choosing to replace their ethnic themed mascots with new symbology that is more inclusive and does not offend or claim to represent any ethnic group. At the same time, the controversy over school mascots in Vermont continues to cause division in our local school communities. Most recently, Rutland's decision to reverse their new mascot has set a poor precedent, and set a poor example to students who were working hard to make their school more inclusive. This is not the message we should be sending our students.

You do not need to be Indigenous to be offended by Native themed mascots. Vermont students are embarrassed to play on their sports teams, because students and parents at other schools cringe at the sight of these teams on the field at sporting events. The existence of this symbology perpetuates stereotyping and behavior that has been proven to cause significant psychological harm to Indigenous youth, and makes these schools unsafe and unwelcoming places. Allowing these mascots is to allow something that is known to be damaging to the mental health of our youth. This impact on student mental health has been well documented. ***Rates of suicide among Indigenous youth, ages 15-18, are more than double that of white students.***

These impacts are unacceptable in a public school which should provide a safe learning environment for all students. The students working to change these mascots have met with a broken and divisive Civic process, and they have suffered backlash in their towns and on their sports teams. They are discouraged to speak up because they are not being supported. This is also damaging students' confidence, self esteem, and willingness to speak up.

Finally, and most importantly, our own [Abenaki Community](#) members have acknowledged the damage of these stereotypes, and have been clear that they believe these schools should stop using ethnic themed mascots. You will hear from Judy Dow today, and earlier in the week Chief Don Stevens spoke to the Education Committee about the stereotypes that these mascots perpetuate. The Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs has also made a statement that was provided by Carol McGranahan, and many other [members of our Abenaki community](#) have made clear and public statements to this regard. This sentiment has been repeated throughout the [Indigenous community nationally](#) and has inspired these changes in other

schools. Vermont needs to hold all of our public schools to the expectation that they are inclusive and safe environments for all students, and this includes disallowing ethnic mascots.

Of course, eliminating school mascots is only part of the journey. This effort needs to be coupled with curriculum updates in our schools that are guided by our Indigenous community. The resources available and being offered to our schools are many, and several related links are available at morethanamascot.org. There should be an expectation that all teachers have access to current resources and books and the professional development they need to incorporate these resources in a respectful and intentional way in the classroom. The speakers, field trips, and presentations [offered by our Abenaki community](#) should be sought after and funded by our schools.

We cannot delay this important change any longer. In fact, any delay sends the message to our Indigenous community that the harming of their children is not a priority. Given the recent trauma related to the discovery of thousands of children lost at boarding schools in our country, it is more important than ever that we show that Vermont values the children in our Indigenous community.

Passing this bill sends the message that Vermont cares about creating school cultures that are responsive to the need to embrace diversity and inclusivity. Although changes like these can be hard to accept, I am confident that these new mascots will result in more positive school communities overall. The current climate of derision at the local level over this issue is almost as damaging as the mascots themselves. **Please support Senate Bill S.139 which will create more inclusive schools for all Vermont students.**

Sincerely,

Deborah Velto
MSEd

Springfield VT

Suggested Resources

Websites -

Morethanamascotvt.org - Statewide group for Mascot Legislation. Our resource page has many things worth reviewing.

Projectmascotvt.org - Chester, VT based group

[Coalition of Natives and Allies](#)

Statements -

Elnu Band of Abenaki

<https://sokokisojourn.wordpress.com/2016/09/30/elnu-abenaki-position-statement-on-native-mascots/>

American Psychological Association

<https://www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/indian-mascots>

National Council for Indian Affairs

<https://www.ncai.org/proudtobe>

Articles -

The Psychological Effects of Mascots -

https://web.stanford.edu/group/mcslab/cgi-bin/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Of-warrior-chiefs-and-Indian-princesses.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2RyAl-wVr4__-kpxkl4sqo1ZmPEoPbFOL9mACw-sy6kJIQWhK4NhxS2v3s

American Superintendents Association - *The Cost of Native Themed Mascots*

https://aasa.org/content.aspx?id=34458&fbclid=IwAR0XW4yErT0yg2wRQ2Ovx5ZRJ2Pt_W25I1GyZY-7PrC4md9Hnkyx6QDDAgY

Harmful Effects from Native-Themed Mascots

<https://indiancountrytoday.com/news/study-finds-only-harmful-effects-from-native-themed-mascots>

National Association of Mental Illness - Identity and Indigenous mental health

<https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Identity-and-Cultural-Dimensions/Indigenous>