

Testimony to VT Legislators on
S.139: An act relating to public schools' team mascots
2/11/22

My name is Laurel Davis-Delano, and I am a Professor of Sociology from Springfield College in Springfield, MA. I have studied the topic of Native American mascots for over 25 years, and I work with other scholars who do the same. Below, I summarize research findings on the effects of Native American mascots/nicknames/logos.

Native American mascots are stereotypes. In particular they are Hollywood versions of Native American male warriors and chiefs from the past.

Research demonstrates that Native American mascots harm Native American students. In particular, these mascots reduce the self-esteem of Native youth, reduce the ability of Native youth to imagine future achievements, and reduce faith Native youth have in their tribal communities. Research also demonstrates that these mascots generate stress for Native American students, as well as other negative feelings, including depression and hostility.

Research also demonstrates that Native American mascots have negative effects on non-Native people. First, research using samples of non-Native people reveals that these mascots are associated with negative thoughts and stereotypes about Native Americans, Second, exposing non-Native people to Native mascots increases negative stereotyping of Native Americans. Third, even though non-Native supporters of Native American mascots claim that they are honoring Native Americans, supporters of these mascots are more apt than opponents to hold stereotypical/prejudicial attitudes toward Native Americans as well as less apt to support the interests of Native Americans. Lastly, Native American mascots are associated with a tendency to discriminate against Native Americans.

Overall, although supporters of Native mascots often intend to honor Native Americans and believe that these mascots convey positive ideas about Native Americans, research clearly demonstrates that these mascots are not educationally sound. And, those making decisions about education, including legislators, should focus on research findings rather than intentions and public opinion.

There are several reasons why it is problematic to leave decisions about Native American mascots to local communities. First, these mascots are representations of Native Americans, and most of people in VT are not Native American. It is Native Americans who should get to determine how they are portrayed, not non-Native people. The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) is the largest and most representative Native American organization. They have been working for over 50 years to eliminate Native American mascots. VT legislators should follow the lead of the NCAI. Second, local struggles over Native American mascots generate a hostile climate for Native American people in the town/city and region where these struggles occur. And, it is extremely stressful for Native Americans to play a role in these struggles. Further, school committee members and school administrators who favor change also face a hostile climate, and sometimes lose their positions solely due to their opposition to the local Native mascot.

In summary, it is imperative that legislators pass laws to eliminate Native American mascots so that Native American students will not face a hostile learning climate and to reduce misinformation about Native Americans for all students.