

(Testimony by Cathy Solsaa, February 16, 2022)

Hello, my name is Cathy Solsaa and I live in Rutland City. Thank you very much for this opportunity to speak with you today. I'd like to talk about S.139, the bill that would prohibit public schools from having a mascot or team name that depicts or refers to a racial or ethnic group. I urge you to please pass this bill as it was originally written.

I think I can safely say that we all agree that indigenous or racially themed mascots are harmful. We know this because organizations like the National Congress of American Indians, federally recognized tribes, local tribes, the American Psychological Association, and our own Native American students have told us this. These mascots are harmful to Native American students and non-Native American students by perpetuating negative stereotyping and prejudiced attitudes and fostering an unsafe learning environment. The cost of this is high. In 2020, the Vermont School Board Association and the Vermont Principal's Association recognized this with statements and directives to change indigenous and racially themed mascots where they exist in our public schools. Yet we still have more than two dozen schools in Vermont with harmful mascots, with no plans to change them, and some communities loudly and staunchly opposed to a change.

Clearly, a statement or directive is not enough. History has shown that often legislation is necessary to assure compliance – think seatbelts, composting, plastic bags, all of which required legislation. And legislation has always been mandatory around topics of gender, race, physical and intellectual ability, and equity.

The issue of eliminating indigenous mascots has become so heated and divisive in some communities, and the push back so intense, it has also become clear that there needs to be some accountability measures attached to legislation. Without accountability, I believe there are communities that will not comply. Since mascots are primarily related to sports teams, it seems the natural consequence to non-compliance would be ineligibility to participate in VPA sanctioned sporting events. The bill provides three years to make the change, more than enough time to comply. Please note, so long as a school complies, consequences are not an issue. In Colorado, mascot legislation was enacted in 2021, and schools were given one year to comply. Non-compliance results in a \$25,000 per month penalty thereafter, with these funds going into the state's educational fund. Vermont's three years to comply with a natural consequence for non-compliance seems very fair. Our children will not be hurt if the adults do the right thing and change harmful mascots.

Please pass this legislation as it originally was written, so that our Native American and non-Native American children have a safe educational space to learn and grow into active, engaged citizens. Please, stop the on-going harm of indigenous and racially themed mascots and team names.