

Vermont Agency of Education
Secretary Daniel M. French
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Montpelier, VT 05620-2501



NAACP
Rutland Area Branch

RE: Act 152. An act relating to nondiscriminatory school branding

The undersigned are writing on behalf of ourselves as people who are and who represent organizations in support of Indigenous Natives of Vermont and as well as a national civil rights organization.

Mascots are an issue that is often avoided by schools because of controversy and reaped in a fallacy of historic tradition. School boards listen to stories of “it’s our legacy”, “It’s always been, it’s our history”. With little to no understanding that this legacy is painful and offensive to too many, it’s not a positive memory for everyone.

According to the Oxford dictionary, Mascot means: a person or thing supposed to bring good luck or used to symbolize a particular event or organization. According to Merriam Webster means: a person, animal, or object adopted by a group as a symbolic figure especially, to bring them good luck. With this in mind, it is denigrating to be used as a symbol of good luck especially for peoples who have been long subjected to violence because of their racial and ethnic identity. We are at a point in time where we must remove this symbolism in order to remove the legacy of white supremacy which harms all students and people.

There is another argument that using the names and symbols that are connected to Natives is actually ‘honoring” them. But in fact, it's actually objectifying them. An example would be when an opposing team is getting ready to compete against one of the schools with these mascots, they often burn their mascot in effigy during bonfire pep rallies.

The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) and over 1,500 national Native organizations and advocates have called for a ban on all Native imagery, names, and other appropriation of Native culture in sports. The joint letter included over 100 Native-led organizations, as well as tribal leaders and members of over 150 federally recognized tribes, reflecting their consensus that Native mascots are harmful. Deb Haaland approved in March 2021 as the first Indigenous Secretary of the Interior, has long advocated for teams to change Native American mascots.

Below is a comprehensive list of mascots that we have identified to be using mascots name and/or imagery, which will be recognized as upholding harmful legacies that continue to harm our children. We are submitting this letter to formally file a complaint against the following schools as part of Act 152: An act relating to nondiscriminatory school branding.

MISSISQUOI HIGH SCHOOL - SWANTON

The thunder bird at Missisquoi High School in Swanton, is unsettling. While there is an understanding that 1 in 5 of the members of their school are from Indian descent, this is true of most schools throughout northern Vermont. According to Jim Peterson, a deceased Anthropologist from UVM that self-identified as Abenaki, 75% of the people living north of route 2 in Vermont with a French sur name are from Indian descent. Which makes it even more offensive to the other schools.

The Thunderbird is an extremely sacred being or spirit from our stories. There are at least four stories told by respected elders from the past. The Thunderbird is a man with wings in these stories, and he controls the lightning and thunder and brings the wind. Our word for the big drum, our sacred drum used in ceremonies is badogi meaning big thunder. The word for Thunderbird is beddaguek or Thunder. Our music carries the voice of the Thunderbird with it, our music is the heartbeat of the nation.

This sacred being should not be used as a mascot in a public school. Missisquoi is not an Indian School, it is a public school the same as any other schools in northern Vermont with a large number of students that descend from an Indigenous person. Vermont follows the one drop rule. One ancestor back in the 1600s makes you an Indian? Does it really? Does this mean, that Danville or Rice High School can go back to being the Indians? No, it doesn't these are offensive. So oftentimes people feel the right to identify as Native when the debate for mascots begins, without understanding the history and legacy of harm. For example, recently an athletic director at Chester claimed to be Native yet he had never been heard to claim that before.

Basically, if you let one of our sacred beings stay as a mascot based on someone who has no connection to tradition and history, others will follow.

VERMONT COMMONS - SOUTH BURLINGTON

Falling into this spiritual category would be "flying turtle" at Vermont Commons. Our creation story is about the turtle that gave its life for us.

Again like the Thunderbird, using flying turtle as a mascot objectifies our religion. Furthermore, if you were to look at this from a different spiritual perspective could you see an apostle or disciples or Jesus or Mary as a mascot? That would not be appropriate, neither is a Thunderbird or Flying Turtle.

BRATTLEBORO UNION HIGH SCHOOL - BRATTLEBORO

Brattleboro Colonels have been in discussion for a long time. They supposedly dropped the mascot image in 2003-2004 school year, but yet students and teachers alike currently refer to themselves as the "Nels" or the "Colonels" as they bully others for their differences. With a mascot named for Col. William Brattle a southern colonial colonel you can image how the use of the name is still offensive to many. This name is overtly connected to slavery and the Civil War south. The percentage of students of color in this school is the highest in the state at 15%.

And yet the battle continues today over this racist name and how it is used within the walls of the school, a supposed safe place to learn. I've seen first-hand after teaching there, it's a safe place for white students only. This too must change, they did not learn their lesson from just dropping the image the name must be taken away as well.

LELAND & GRAY UNION MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL- TOWNSHEND

This brings us to the "Rebels" from Leland and Gray: Again, the term alone denotes imagery of what the Native People are often referred to and an image of a confederate soldier rebelling against the north's perspective to do away with enslaved people. If we are to condemn stereotypes and biases we must eliminate this way of thinking of America's past. Black lives matter, we can no longer hold onto these horrific beliefs.

RANDOLPH UNION HIGH SCHOOL - RANDOLPH

The Galloping Ghosts of Randolph, recently tried to repaint the clear image of a KKK rider and make it into something more ghostly. Legacy is strong here, history is strong here, this change will not change history. The painful reminder of the KKK will forever be with us. A story of a long standing African American Vermont legislator recently told me, he was going to a basketball game to play the kids from Randolph. Upon entering the gym and seeing the Galloping KKK ghost, he was frightened, he froze, he could not play, he could not concentrate and to this day he remembers those terrible feelings. Once again there is a deep legacy attached to this image, newly painted or not. This image and the name must go.

REMOVING IMAGES BUT NOT REMOVING NAMES

The raiders at **U32 in Montpelier and Stowe High School in Stowe**, the "Chieftains" and "Lady Chieftains" at **Green Mountain in Chester**, are still using the name but supposedly have gotten rid of the image. However, it still appears on tee shirts and sweat shirts in local stores for sale today. The image of a plains Indian with a headdress supposedly has been dropped but because the name still exists, so does the image. The legacy still continues, dropping the image is not sufficient. There is no equity here, because we cannot share our opinions or make this go away. This is disrespectful. We have heard that Chester recently dropped the name and the image – we urge you to investigate if this is indeed true.

Let's hope the recent news about the Rutland raiders is done. If they should change their minds again, we would like to file a complaint against them. Their legacy is deep and harmful.

It is important for all of these schools to truly do an in-depth examination of the history of their mascot names. The legacy continues if they do not.

MASCOT NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH VIOLENCE

We live in a world where school shootings occur regularly. Black and Brown people are regularly recorded on the news as being killed by in places of worship and grocery stores.

How can we continue to promote violence in our school by having a mascot called the bullets, the Rangers, the Minutemen, the Marauders, the patriots? We live in a state where we are encouraging new arrivals daily. Schools are the deciding factor in where they settle often. If your child had come from a war torn country would you want them attending a school with a mascot called the bullets? Violence promoted symbolically surely encourages violence to happen in real life and it has deleterious effects on all people.

During the insurrection that occurred on January 6th, people destroyed, killed and maimed people protecting our Capitol and many of them call themselves the "Patriots". Furthermore there are organizations that exist in Vermont who are confirmed hate groups by national law enforcement officials who label themselves as the "Patriot Front." They have been known to litter our state and in particular our universities with hateful propaganda.

At the southern border there are groups of vigilantes who harm and sometimes cause violence specifically to people seeking asylum. They call themselves "Minutemen"

These so-called patriots and minutemen are the very people that took our land and life ways. Patriots and minutemen in today's world signify fighting, war and violence.

We are urging you to consider each of the statements above and we are officially filing complaints with the full approval of our organizations.

We are available to discuss any of these issues with you to go more in-depth.

We are certain Vermont can do better and lead the nation in becoming a safe and welcoming environment for all people. Whether we are white, Brown or Black and whether we are new immigrants or the original caretakers of this land, we all desire to have safe, happy healthy communities and children free from imagery and names that perpetuate harm. Isn't this what you would want for your children and grand children?

Sincerely,

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