

MEMO

DATE: December 27, 2005
TO: District Administrators
FROM: Elizabeth Burmaster
State Superintendent
SUBJECT: American Indian Logos, Mascots, and Nicknames

In the latter part of 2005, the American Psychological Association (APA) adopted a resolution calling upon schools to end the use of American Indian mascots, symbols, images, and personalities for their athletic teams. The resolution cites, among other concerns, the potential negative impact of the use of such mascots, symbols, images, and personalities have on the mental health of all students, particularly American Indian students.

Enclosed is a copy of the resolution along with a justification statement of support. The resolution states “The continued use of American Indian mascots, symbols, images, and personalities establishes an unwelcome and often times hostile learning environment that affirms negative images and stereotypes that are promoted in mainstream society.”

As you know, I believe that stereotypical American Indian logos do not support sound educational practice because they interfere with a school’s efforts to provide accurate information related to the history, culture, and tribal sovereignty of American Indian nations. In addition to ensuring sound educational practices, we need to ensure that all of our children feel welcome in our schools. The New Wisconsin Promise guarantees a quality education for every child through attention to and respect for diversity, including differences in race and culture. Stereotypical logos can hurt our children, albeit unintentionally. For all these reasons, I have consistently called for the elimination of these logos from our schools. The eleven tribal governments in Wisconsin, the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council, the Wisconsin Indian Education Association, the Wisconsin Education Association Council, other Indian nations and organizations across the country, various national nonprofit and faith-based organizations, and most recently, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, have all called for the elimination of these logos, mascots, and nicknames.

The Department of Public Instruction has supported legislation to address this issue and supports SB 172 and AB 395 in the current session. These bills would amend the existing pupil nondiscrimination statute to allow those objecting to a school district’s use of an ethnic name, nickname, logo, or mascot to file a complaint with the State Superintendent. At the ensuing hearing, the school district must prove by clear and convincing evidence that its use of the ethnic name, nickname, logo, or mascot does not promote discrimination, harassment, or stereotyping. These measures would not yield a broad ban on the use of American Indian names, nicknames, logos, or mascots, rather they would provide a more effective means for affected parties to express their concerns.

We have seen a positive trend in Wisconsin’s schools with regard to the discontinuation of American Indian logos. Over the past 16 years, 25 districts have replaced their ethnic logos. I encourage those districts who continue to use American Indian logos and/or mascots to engage their communities in finding positive alternatives. My staff is available to offer information about resources and strategies that may help in these efforts. Let’s work together to keep the New Wisconsin Promise made to all our children.

EB:jpl
Enclosures