



State of Wisconsin
Department of Public Instruction

Mailing Address: P.O. Box 7841, Madison, WI 53707-7841
125 South Webster Street, Madison, WI 53702 (608) 266-3390/(608) 267-2427 TDD

John T. Benson
State Superintendent

Robert H. Gomoll
Deputy State Superintendent

April 1, 1994

Dear

According to our most recent records, your school district is one among approximately 65 districts in the state which still has an American Indian related mascot, logo or nickname. I am writing to strongly urge you to take steps to change this mascot to one which is ethnic (as well as gender) sensitive.

As you are probably aware, the Attorney General issued an opinion in 1992 that the use of American Indian mascots, logos and nicknames in public schools may be a violation of s.118.13, Stats. While this is a legitimate, legal reason to seriously undertake a review of your school's mascot or logo, other important reasons also exist.

Many American Indians, American Indian educators, American Indian educational organizations, the NEA, local and regional religious groups and a growing number of private citizens believe that Indian related mascots, logos and nicknames promote stereotypes and bias. They contend that these mascots are racist in nature in that they demean and distort the culture, religion, and historical and contemporary image of American Indian people.


At the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), we hear and recognize these concerns. While some would dismiss these voices, expressing that they are honoring Indians with their mascots, and that they see them as a source of pride, we at DPI have to ask the question, "How can you be honoring people while they are telling you that what you are doing is demeaning to them?"

As a general principle, there should not be any curricular or extra-curricular component of any Wisconsin public school which promotes stereotypes about any religious, ethnic, or other protected group. The department is compiling an ever growing list of individuals and organizations which state that American Indian mascots in public schools need to be changed to something that does not promote stereotypes and bias and is non-offensive to pupil and adult populations in Wisconsin.

In 1989, the legislature passed several laws which require school districts, starting in September 1991, to teach about Wisconsin tribal history, culture and sovereignty. This was due to the acknowledgement that both adult and pupil populations in Wisconsin were largely unaware and lacked understanding and sensitivity concerning treaty rights of Wisconsin tribes and bands. The question then needs to be asked, "How can we be promoting the understanding of tribal history, culture and sovereignty in the classroom while we are, at the same time, promoting Indian stereotypes on the football field, on the basketball court, in the school newspaper, on school stationery and in other areas?"

I believe American Indian related mascots, logos and nicknames are entirely inappropriate for use in Wisconsin's public schools. Again, I strongly encourage you to take steps to eliminate these in your school district if you have not already done so. In addition to the enclosed packet, Francis Steindorf, consultant with the American Indian studies program has additional information available to assist you with your review. Please feel free to contact him at (608) 267-2283.

Sincerely,



John T. Benson
State Superintendent

JTB:ce

enclosure

cc: Barbara A. Bitters, Chief
Equity and Multicultural Education Section

Francis W. Steindorf, Consultant
American Indian Studies Program

BEEP EME 494

RAYMOND NORSTED
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
AMERY S D
115 BIRCH TERRACE N
AMERY, WI 54001

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DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
ARCADIA S D
308 EAST MAIN STREET
ARCADIA, WI 54612

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DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
ARROWHEAD UHS S D
700 NORTH AVENUE
HARTLAND, WI 53029

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DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
AUBURNDALE S D
501 NORTH STREET P.O. BOX 190
AUBURNDALE, WI 54412

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DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
BALDWIN-WOODVILLE AREA S D
780 MAIN STREET, SUITE #2
BALDWIN, WI 54002

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DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
BERLIN AREA S D
295 E. MARQUETTE STREET
BERLIN, WI 54923

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DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
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202 CENTER STREET P.O. BOX D
SOUTH WAYNE, WI 53587

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DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
BELMONT S D
546 LIBERTY ROAD P.O. BOX 348
BELMONT, WI 53510

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PAULINE ROLL
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
BLOOMER S D
1310 17TH AVENUE
BLOOMER, WI 54724

BEEP EME 494

LEE L. PAUL
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
BRUCE S D
104 W. WASHINGTON AVENUE P.O.
BOX 308
BRUCE, WI 54819

BEEP EME 494

RAY H. SMITH
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
CLEAR LAKE S D
560 FIFTH STREET P.O. BOX 428
CLEAR LAKE, WI 54005

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THOMAS WILKINS
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
CORNELL S D
205 SOUTH SEVENTH
STREET P.O. BOX 517
CORNELL, WI 54732

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DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
ELMWOOD S D
103 WILSON AVENUE P.O. BOX 98
ELMWOOD, WI 54740

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DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
FORT ATKINSON S D
317 SOUTH HIGH STREET
FORT ATKINSON, WI 53538

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DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
GALESVILLE-ETTRICK-
TREMP S D
1007 NORTH MAIN STREET
GALESVILLE, WI 54630

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LOUIS BIRCHBAUER
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
GERMANTOWN S D
N104 W13840 DONGES BAY ROAD
GERMANTOWN, WI 53022

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EDWARD E. ECKHARDT
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
GRAFTON S D
1900 WASHINGTON STREET
GRAFTON, WI 53024

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DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
GREENWOOD S D
209 SOUTH HENDREN
AVENUE
GREENWOOD, WI 54437

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DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
HUDSON S D
416 SAINT CROIX STREET
HUDSON, WI 54016

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DAVID HEATHER
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
KEWASKUM S D
1450 SCHOOL STREET P.O. BOX 37
KEWASKUM, WI 53040-0037

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ROY STONE
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
KEWAUNEE S D
911 THIRD STREET
KEWAUNEE, WI 54216

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DON D. MATTOX
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
KIEL AREA S D
416 PAINE STREET P.O. BOX 201
KIEL, WI 53042

BEPP EME 494

RICHARD A. SWANTZ
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
LA CROSSE S D
807 EAST AVENUE SOUTH
LA CROSSE, WI 54601

BEPP EME 494

WILLIAM F. STIMELING
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
LAKE HOLCOMBE S D
SPOONER AND JENKINS
STREETS P.O. BOX 40
HOLCOMBE, WI 54745

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DAN A. DAHLGREN
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
LANCASTER COMMUNITY S D
925 WEST MAPLE STREET
LANCASTER, WI 53813

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ROBERT BURMESTER
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
MARATHON CITY S D
204 EAST STREET
MARATHON, WI 54448-0037

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PAUL SCHOENBERGER
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
MEDFORD AREA S D
124 WEST STATE STREET
MEDFORD, WI 54451

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JAMES J. SHAW
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
MENOMONEE FALLS S D
N84 W16579 MENOMONEE AVENUE
MENOMONEE FALLS, WI 53051

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DAVID SMETTE
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
MENOMONIE AREA S D
718 NORTH BROADWAY
MENOMONIE, WI 54751

BEPP EME 494

JON C. PLATTS
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
MILTON S D
430 EAST HIGH STREET,
SUITE 2
MILTON, WI 53563

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HOWARD FULLER
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
MILWAUKEE S D
5225 WEST VLIET STREET P.O.
DRAWER 10K
MILWAUKEE, WI 53201

BEPP EME 494

TERRY J. SCHMIDT
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
MISHICOT S D
660 WASHINGTON STREET P.O.
BOX 93
MISHICOT, WI 54228

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DENNIS RISLOVE
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
MOSINEE S D
591 WEST HIGHWAY 153
MOSINEE, WI 54455

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PAUL A. STROBEL
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
MUKWONAGO S D
423 DIVISION STREET
MUKWONAGO, WI 53149

BEPP EME 494

RICHARD WASSON
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
MUSKEGO-NORWAY S D
S75 W16399 HILLTOP DRIVE P.O.
BOX 900
MUSKEGO, WI 53150

BEPP EME 494

RICHARD QUAST
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
NEILLSVILLE S D
614 EAST FIFTH STREET
NEILLSVILLE, WI 54456

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FRANK PARSONS
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
NORTHERN OZAUKEE S D
401 HIGHLAND DRIVE
FREDONIA, WI 53021

BEPP EME 494

MICHAEL C. WILLIAMS
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
OSCEOLA S D
550 CHIEFTAIN STREET NORTH
P.O. BOX 128
OSCEOLA, WI 54020

BEPP EME 494

JAMES B. HENDERSON
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
OSHKOSH AREA S D
1600 SOUTHLAND AVENUE
P.O. BOX 3048
OSHKOSH, WI 54903

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DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
OSSEO-FAIRCHILD S D
13TH & FRANCIS P.O. BOX 130
OSSEO, WI 54758

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DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
OWEN-WITHEE S D
832 WEST 3RD STREET P.O. BOX
417
OWEN, WI 54460

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STEVE MIEDEN
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
PORT EDWARDS S D
801 SECOND STREET
PORT EDWARDS, WI 54469

BEEP EME 494

DANIEL PULSFUS
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
PORTAGE COMMUNITY S D
904 DEWITT STREET
PORTAGE, WI 53901

BEEP EME 494

ERIC S. BRIEHL
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
POTOSI S D
128 HIGHWAY 61 NORTH P.O. BOX
193
POTOSI, WI 53820

BEEP EME 494

JOHN SARNOW
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
POYNETTE S D
436 EAST WASHINGTON
STREET P.O. BOX 10
POYNETTE, WI 53955

BEEP EME 494

JOHN FOSTER
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
PRAIRIE DU CHIEN AREA S D
800 EAST CRAWFORD STREET
PRAIRIE DU CHIEN, WI 53821

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STEVEN KOCH
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
PULASKI COMMUNITY S D
143 WEST GREEN BAY STREET
P.O. BOX 36
PULASKI, WI 54162

BEEP EME 494

RAMON E. PARKS
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
RIB LAKE S D
1200 NORTH STREET P.O.
BOX 278
RIB LAKE, WI 54470

BEEP EME 494

ROBERT J. FOSTER
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
RICE LAKE AREA S D
700 AUGUSTA STREET
RICE LAKE, WI 54868

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MICHAEL MANNING
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
RIVER VALLEY S D
660 WEST DALEY STREET P.O.
BOX 729
SPRING GREEN, WI 53588

BEEP EME 494

THOMAS YAGER
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
RIVERDALE S D
408 NORTH WISCONSIN
AVENUE P.O. BOX 66
MUSCODA, WI 53573

BEEP EME 494

SARA L. CRONEY
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
SENECA S D P.O. BOX 34
SENECA, WI 54654

BEEP EME 494

GEORGE P. LONGO
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
SHEBOYGAN AREA S D
830 VIRGINIA AVENUE
SHEBOYGAN, WI 53081

BEEP EME 494

ROBERT MCCOY
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
SHIOCTON S D
BROAD STREET P.O. BOX 68
SHIOCTON, WI 54170

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TERRY WISEMAN
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
STOCKBRIDGE S D
110 SCHOOL STREET P.O. BOX 188
STOCKBRIDGE, WI 53088

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ANTHONY M. HINDEN
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
TOMAH AREA S D
129 WEST CLIFTON STREET
TOMAH, WI 54660-2507

BEEP EME 494

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DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
TOMAHAWK S D
18 EAST WASHINGTON
AVENUE
TOMAHAWK, WI 54487

BEEP EME 494

JIM WALLER
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
VIROQUA AREA S D BLACKHAWK
DRIVE
VIROQUA, WI 54665

BEEP EME 494

GEORGIANN MCKENNA
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
WALWORTH J1 S D
121 BELoit STREET P.O. BOX 220
WALWORTH, WI 53184

BEEP EME 494

EUGENE J. HAMELE
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
WAUNAKEE COMMUNITY S D
101 SCHOOL DRIVE
WAUNAKEE, WI 53597

BEEP EME 494

WILLIAM BOBBE
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
WAUPUN S D
950 WILCOX STREET
WAUPUN, WI 53963

BEEP EME 494

THOMAS E. FISCHER
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
WAUSAU S D 415 SEYMOUR
STREET
WAUSAU, WI 54402-0359

BEEP EME 494

GEORGE A. GOENS
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
WAUWATOSA S D
12121 WEST NORTH AVENUE
WAUWATOSA, WI 53226

Add Big Foot

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ROBERT HECHT
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
WEYAUWEGA-FREMONT S D
310 EAST MAIN STREET P.O. BOX 580
WEYAUWEGA, WI 54983

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JAMES SCHUCHARDT
ACTING DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
WINTER S D
MAIN STREET P.O. BOX 7
WINTER, WI 54896

BEEP EME 494

ROBERT STIRN
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
WISCONSIN DELLS S D
811 COUNTY HIGHWAY H
WISCONSIN DELLS, WI 53965

BEEP EME 494

TIMOTHY E. LAATSCH
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
WISCONSIN RAPIDS S D
510 PEACH STREET
WISCONSIN RAPIDS, WI 54494

BEEP EME 494

KENT NELSON
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR
WONEWOC-UNION CENTER S D
101 SCHOOL ROAD P.O. BOX 368
WONEWOC, WI 53968

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