



TO: Presidents of Boards of Education and Superintendents of Public Schools
FROM: Richard P. Mills
SUBJECT: Public Schools Use of Native American Names, Symbols, and Mascots
DATE: April 5, 2001

Some time ago, I directed Department staff to study the use of Native American mascots by public schools. I would like to share with you the results of that work.

What I conclude

Our review confirmed that the use of Native American symbols is part of time-honored traditions in some of our communities, and that there are deeply felt, albeit conflicting, ideas about them. Some members of these communities believe that the mascots honor or pay tribute to Native Americans and their culture. However, most Native Americans appear to find the portrayal by others of their treasured cultural and religious symbols disparaging and disrespectful. Many others who have looked at this issue concur.

After careful thought and consideration, I have concluded that the use of Native American symbols or depictions as mascots can become a barrier to building a safe and nurturing school community and improving academic achievement for all students. I ask the superintendents and presidents of school boards to lead their communities to a new understanding of this matter. I ask boards to end the use of Native American mascots as soon as practical. Some communities have thought about this and are ready to act. Others already have acted and I commend them. Yet, in others, more reflection and listening is needed, and so I ask that these discussions begin now. I believe that local leaders can find the right way to inquire into this matter and resolve it locally. Next year I will formally evaluate the progress on this issue.

Here is my reasoning.

What we found:

There has already been extensive statewide discussion of this issue. Some of it is eloquent. We sought the views of local superintendents. Many wrote directly and many others expressed their thoughts through District Superintendents. I have had extended conversations with a few of them. We contacted representatives of Native American communities. We also asked the counsel of District Superintendents. We researched the literature on this subject and read legal documents from other states. We examined New York law, regulation, and Regents policy. In addition, many citizens wrote to us.

The use of Native American names, symbols, and mascots is such a significant issue that it is being looked at in other states, in professional sports, at the collegiate level, as well as at the local level in some New York school districts. The Society of the Indian Psychologists of the Americas has raised the concern that the use of these mascots and symbols creates an "unwelcome academic environment" for Native American students. Organizations such as the NAACP, and the NEA have issued statements calling for an end to the use of mascots. The U.S.

Census 2000 issued a resolution stating that it would not include teams that used these symbols as part of its promotional program. Over the last 30 years, more than 600 colleges, universities and high schools have changed or eliminated their use of Native American mascots. For example, the Los Angeles school board required its junior high and high schools to drop Native American-themed names and mascots, and 20 high schools in Wisconsin followed suit. Collegiate institutions such as Miami University of Ohio, St. John's University, Siena College and Stanford University have changed their school logos. In the professional sports world, objections have also arisen, and it is clear that recent expansion teams in professional baseball, hockey, football and basketball have avoided the use of Indian-themed names or mascots.

In 1999, the United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division investigated a North Carolina school district to determine if the high school's mascot and nicknames violated Federal Civil Rights Law by creating a racially hostile environment. That investigation was closed after the school district's board of education decided to eliminate the use of Native American religious symbols.

In August 2000, Attorney General Elliot Spitzer reviewed this issue as it related to a New York State school district. The Attorney General raised serious concerns that certain uses of Native American mascots and symbols could violate the Federal Civil Rights Act of 1964. His opinion identified many factors that school districts should consider in examining their use of these symbols and mascots, particularly areas such as stereotypical nicknames, images, gestures and use of historical and religious symbols such as feather headdress, face-paint, or totem poles.

Clearly, many of those who are thinking deeply about this issue are concerned that the use of these symbols should end.

The argument:

Schools must provide a safe and supportive environment that promotes achievement of the standards for all children. The use of Native American mascots by some schools can make that school environment seem less safe and supportive to some children, and may send an inappropriate message to children about what is or is not respectful behavior toward others. For that reason we must question the use of such mascots. If children and parents in the school community are offended or made to feel diminished by the school mascot, what school leader or board would not want to know that and correct the situation? School mascots are intended to make a statement about what the school values. School leaders and communities may not be aware that the statement heard can be contrary to the one intended.

Here are some thoughts from a student: "Today this school promotes respect, responsibility, compassion, honest, and tolerance. When you use words like these, you need to teach by example. The resigning of this mascot would be a great example of these character education words. I would like to see my brother, sister, and cousins go to a school that shows respect and tolerance for other cultures. I don't want them to feel the confusion that I have felt going to this school. It has taken me a couple of years to come to understand Native American stereotypes and their effects on me. By keeping [this] mascot the principal lesson the students, staff, and community learn is how to tolerate stereotypes."

Some argue that such mascots honor Native Americans. Most Native American representatives do not share that view.

Some would argue that mascots that are problematic could be made dignified through some state review process. It is difficult to imagine how to craft criteria to make such a judgment process feasible on a statewide basis. Most people would recognize and deplore mocking, distorted representations of minority group members. However, fair-minded people might view these mascots as respectful without realizing that the representation included religious symbols that Native American observers would find distressing when used in that manner.

Some urge keeping the status quo. That is not realistic either. Collegiate sports and newer professional teams have recognized changing public attitudes and decided not to use Native American mascots. The same changes that affected them will eventually overtake schools. It would be better resolve the matter now. The central role of sports in this issue is advantageous. Few areas of American life are as concerned about fairness and respect for individual value and achievement as is the world of sport. We can turn to those values as we think about mascots.

Some call for an immediate and statewide halt to the use of these mascots. That approach is not advisable. People in many communities haven't had an opportunity to talk about this and listen to one another. There are cherished traditions surrounding many of the mascots. There are even significant costs involved: consider mascots on team uniforms and gymnasium floors, to cite obvious examples. In any case, local remedies should be exhausted first. Many communities have engaged the issue and made changes. Many other communities will now do so.

Still others believe this is a local matter. I cannot agree that it is *only* a local matter. There is state interest in providing a safe and supportive learning environment for every child. The use of Native American mascots involves a state responsibility as well.

Here are some questions that might help local communities consider how to approach the issue. I have adapted them from ideas suggested by a New York School Superintendent and they seem like a good place to begin.

- Do Native Americans and non-Native Americans perceive the mascot differently?
- Is there a significant difference between how the mascot may have been intended and how it is interpreted?
- How should an organization respond if its well-intentioned actions unintentionally offend a member of the group's religious or ethnic beliefs?
- Are there other symbols that represent the school's values that could be used in place of the existing mascot?

I call upon school leaders in communities that use Native American symbols, names, or mascots to pose these questions to their communities and lead them in a discussion of the right path to take. It is important that our students learn about the diversity of our communities so that they will understand and respect our difference and draw strength from them in becoming good citizens and productive adults. School administrators, staff, parents and community members play a critical role in modeling behavior that celebrates and honors traditions and beliefs of our fellow citizens. As educators, we have an obligation to inform communities so that they might come to understand the pain, however unintentionally inflicted, these symbols cause.