

Colorado lawmakers vote to ban American Indian mascots in public schools

SB21-116 is headed to the governor's desk and would make Colorado fifth state to get rid of derogatory mascots



RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post

A Lamar High School student walks back to school after play in a soccer game in the fields behind the school, March 31, 2015.

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Colorado public schools will soon be banned from [using derogatory American Indian mascots](#) under a proposed law that the state legislature passed Thursday night.

[SB21-116](#) is headed to Gov. Jared Polis' desk for final approval after the Colorado Senate approved the House's changes.

In becoming the fifth U.S. state to ban such mascots, public schools will have until June 1, 2022, to change their mascots or face a \$25,000 per month fine that'll go toward the state's education fund.

Schools that already have agreements with one of 48 federally recognized Indian tribes with ties in Colorado can keep their mascots if the agreement was made prior to June 30, 2021, but the tribes can revoke those agreements at any point or the agreements can be ended by either party. If that happens, schools will have one year to find a new mascot.

If a public school is named after a tribe — such as Niwot, Yuma or Ouray — or an American Indian person, the school can continue to use the name on its letterhead as long as it doesn't use an image or symbol.

The bill directs the Colorado Commission of Indian Affairs to post which schools still use racist mascots after June 1, 2022. At least 25 schools in Colorado had derogatory mascots as of earlier this year.

The Ute Nation, Southern Ute Nation and the Northern Arapaho Tribe worked closely with lawmakers on the bill. Tribal members have been asking for this change for 30 years, but not many schools choose to do it voluntarily, said sponsor Rep. Barbara McLachlan, a Durango Democrat.

Sponsor Rep. Adrienne Benavidez, a Commerce City Democrat, told House members Wednesday that the bill is about putting a stop to the harm and belittling caricature mascots cause to American Indians, particularly children.

[Studies](#) have shown the effects of these mascots on children's psyche, Benavidez noted, contributing to depression and creating hostile environments, in addition to furthering stereotypes.

"This is a real problem and we need to end it," Benavidez said.

Although some opponents of the bill argued that many of the mascots are not meant to be derogatory, others like Republican Rep. Tim Geitner of Falcon, considered the bill an unfunded mandate because it can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to change mascots. The bill allows schools that need financial assistance to apply for grant funding from the state.

"This is not about saying someone's life is less valuable at all," Geitner said. "This is a matter of saying that we as policymakers have a responsibility to craft good policy."

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