

Bill to ban Native American mascots at Maine schools narrowly clears legislative hurdle

by **Alex Acquisto**

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Skowhegan Area High School cheerleaders stand beneath a mural of the school's mascot on the wall of the gymnasium in Skowhegan, Jan. 15, 2019. Credit: Michael G. Seamans | Portland Press Herald via AP

A bill that seeks to ban the use of Native American mascots in Maine's public schools won approval from a divided legislative committee on Monday.

The Education and Cultural Affairs Committee voted 7-5 along party

lines “ought to pass” on bill from Rep. Benjamin Collings, D-Portland, that would unilaterally bar Maine public schools from adopting Native American names, symbols and images for use as mascots, team names or logos.

Rep. Michael Brennan, D-Portland, who called the matter a “civil rights issue” that merits a “statewide policy,” included an amendment in the approved version of the bill that would extend the rule to publicly funded post-secondary institutions, including the University of Maine System.

The committee’s favorable reception of the bill comes less than a month after the Skowhegan school board voted to permanently remove the “Indians” mascot from Skowhegan High School, capping years of contentious debate and reversing a decision made four years earlier.

Committee Democrats on Monday characterized the use of Native American mascots as a civil rights issue, and one that supersedes Maine’s longstanding commitment to local control.

Republican committee members insisted it was a matter for local entities, usually school boards, to decide.

“We can say it’s civil rights, but it still comes down to being a local control issue. If we continue to take local control away, we’re going down a slippery slope,” said Rep. Shelley Rudnicki, R-Fairfield, who urged lawmakers to proceed cautiously.

Rep. Gary Drinkwater, R-Milford, who voted against the bill, said he believes the local solution in Skowhegan is working, “just not to the satisfaction of everybody, but that’s how democracy works.”

[Debate over Skowhegan’s ‘Indians’ mascot pits neighbor against neighbor]

But Sen. Rebecca Millett, D-Cape Elizabeth, who co-chairs the

committee, said, “There are times when the issue we’re being confronted with rises above local control. For me, this rises above that.”

The 119th Legislature felt similarly in 2000, when it passed a law banning the use of two racially offensive terms as names of geographic places, including streets and subdivisions. It was a modification of a 1977 law that classified an offensive name as one that “causes resentful displeasure to and which is repugnant to the moral sense of a group of persons, and which has a connotation of prejudice based on race, color, sex religion, ancestry or national origin.”

The bill now moves to the House, which must vote on it before sending it to the Senate.