



NATIVE AMERICAN RIGHTS FUND



BANNING NATIVE MASCOTS IS NOT DISCRIMINATION—IT'S PROTECTION

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For generations, Native children have been forced to sit through school assemblies, pep rallies, and sporting events where their identities are mocked. Where their cultures are reduced to offensive chants, cartoonish mascots, and fake regalia worn by non-Native people. These portrayals are not harmless—they are deeply damaging.

The American Psychological Association has found that Native mascots negatively affect the mental health, identity development, and self-esteem of Native youth. Rather than honoring Native peoples, these mascots perpetuate stereotypes, encourage cultural appropriation, and reinforce a long history of erasure and disrespect.

There is a meaningful distinction between Native Nations choosing to represent themselves, using imagery or names that reflect their own communities, and non-Native institutions using racist terms or stereotypes to entertain crowds. The former is cultural expression. The latter is cultural mockery.

Decades ago, some schools and universities began recognizing this harm and chose to retire Native mascots. Those decisions weren't about political correctness, they were about creating safe, respectful environments for all students, especially Native students who deserve to attend school without having to defend their culture or identity.

New York State recently made an important step forward by banning the use of Native mascots in public schools. Tribal leaders across the state supported the ban, which included reasonable exceptions for schools that worked with and received approval from Tribal Nations. It was a thoughtful policy rooted in cultural respect and Native sovereignty.

But in a stunning reversal, the U.S. Department of Education—under a Trump-era rule still in effect—issued a finding that claimed the ban was discriminatory. They argued it unfairly allowed mascots derived from some cultural groups, like the Dutch, while banning Native ones. Worse, they demanded an apology *to* Native Americans—for banning Native mascots.

This logic is dangerously flawed. Native Americans don't need apologies for efforts to protect their children, they need those efforts respected and supported. Discrimination isn't the removal of offensive mascots. Discrimination is forcing Native children to witness their cultures mocked, their sacred regalia turned into props, and their identities turned into jokes.

At the Native American Rights Fund, we know the harm is real, because Native communities and families have been telling us so for decades. We support New York State's ban on Native mascots and unite with the Tribal Nations who are leading the way to protect Native youth.

It's time to listen to Native voices, respect Tribal sovereignty, and leave the mascots in the past.

Bans on Native Mascots do NOT hurt Native Communities #native #indigenouspeoples #mascot #ny