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Sleepy Eye School District to change name to respect Indigenous tribes, follow state law



BY JONAH KAPLAN
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SLEEPY EYE, Minn. — The cultural winds are changing in Sleepy Eye.

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The school district announced it will change its name and the name of its mascot to respect the wishes of Indigenous tribes and follow state law.

The city's name, Sleepy Eye, is the English translation of Ishtakhaba - the Native chief known to have willingly and sometimes reluctantly signed treaties with the U.S. government.

The city will continue to bear the name, but soon the school district will not.

"Initially we were very disappointed," said Superintendent John Cselovszki. "I'm not going to lie to you. We understood, we heard the tribe, we understood it, and we appreciated their honesty."

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Cselovszki posted a letter to families explaining that next, year, the district will begin a process to pick a new name and mascot, after learning local tribes denied its request for an exemption to a new state law banning the use of American Indian images as a school mascot.

Whatever the new name, Sleepy Eye will still be a member of the Tomahawk Conference. Still, the new law's author, Sen. Mary Kunesch is calling for Sleepy Eye's decision to be a gold standard.

"Most people recognize this is a heavy, heavy lift," Kunesch, DFL-New Brighton, said.

Cselovszki said picking a new name and mascot will be an open process, and an opportunity for this generation's creative minds to come alive, and a new meaning for school spirit.

All schools with a Native American mascot will have to change before Sept. 1, 2025. That's unless the district is granted an exemption from Minnesota's tribal leaders. The law does not apply to a school located on a reservation.

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