

BILL S.291 FACT SHEET

An Act to Prohibit the Use of Native American Mascots by Public Schools in the Commonwealth

Overview of Bill S.291

Bill S.291 will prohibit the use of Native American mascots in Massachusetts public schools. About 40 schools in the Commonwealth currently use such mascots, which are defined in the legislation as names, symbols, or images that depict or refer to American Indian tribes, individuals, customs, or traditions. The bill was filed by Senator Barbara A. L'Italien (2nd Essex and Middlesex) by request.

Co-Sponsors

- Rep. Ruth B. Balser – 12th Middlesex
- Sen. William Brownsberger – 2nd Suffolk/Middlesex
- Rep. Michelle DuBois – 10th Plymouth
- Rep. Jack Lewis – 7th Middlesex
- Rep. Elizabeth A. Malia – 11th Suffolk
- Rep. Jose Tosado – 9th Hampden
- Rep. John Scibak – 2nd Hampshire

Harm to Native Students

Decades of social science research have shown that Native American mascots have serious psychological, social, and cultural consequences for indigenous peoples. As stereotypes, mascots do not accurately represent Native people, nor do they honor them. Mascots reinforce one-dimensional, often derogatory stereotypes that overshadow the contributions, perspectives and struggles of contemporary Native people. For many Native people, these racial stereotypes are painful reminders of their historical trauma and of the limited ways that others see them. Native youth are particularly vulnerable to the dehumanizing effects of mascots. Exposure has been shown to cause lowered self-esteem, loss of aspiration, poor academic performance, anxiety, and depression.

Harm to Non-Native Students

Studies have shown that non-Native students who are exposed to Native American mascots are more likely to internalize stereotypical views of other minorities. While negatively impacting the self-esteem of Native students, non-Native students experience a self-esteem boost from Native American mascots. In addition, mascots normalize culturally insensitive behaviors and teach an inaccurate understanding of indigenous people. These problems are compounded by insufficient curricula at all grade levels on the history and culture of Native people (including colonial and U.S. policies of removal and extermination) that would give students a more accurate frame of reference with which to view mascots and other mainstream Native stereotypes.

Civil Rights

Native American mascots may violate anti-discrimination laws because they “establish an unwelcome and often hostile learning environment for American Indian students.” (American Psychological Association Resolution, 2005) “It is particularly disturbing that Native American references are still to be found in educational institutions, whether elementary, secondary or post-secondary. Schools are

places where diverse groups of people come together to learn not only the ‘Three Rs,’ but also how to interact respectfully with people from different cultures. The use of stereotypical images of Native Americans by educational institutions has the potential to create a racially hostile educational environment that may be intimidating to Indian students. American Indians have the lowest high school graduation rates in the nation and even lower college attendance and graduation rates. The perpetuation of harmful stereotypes may exacerbate these problems.” (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2001)

Statewide Issue

According to the 2010 census, there are more than 18,850 Native people living in Massachusetts. These individuals are likely affected by racist mascotry. Often Superintendents and school committees fear community backlash and so fail to take a stand. Issues of civil rights should never be decided in the court of public opinion. Civil Rights and anti-discrimination laws are state laws, and cities and towns should not be allowed to violate such laws because of local mandates.

Advocacy

The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), the country’s largest Native advocacy group, has been fighting to end racist mascotry since the 1960s. Currently over 115 tribal, government, education, professional, civil rights, and religious organizations in the United States have adopted resolutions or policies that call for an immediate end to this practice. In Massachusetts, these entities include the Massachusetts Teachers Association, Massachusetts Commission on Indian Affairs, Massachusetts Center for Native American Awareness, and the Nipmuc Nation. In addition to NCAI, national organizations include the National Education Association, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the American Psychological Association, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

State Measures to Ban Mascots

- California Racial Mascot Act, 2015 – Banned use of Redsk*n name in public schools.
- Wisconsin mascot bill, 2010 – Established a process for residents to file complaints against districts with race-based mascots. State superintendent was given the power to hold a hearing and ban such mascots if deemed discriminatory. (The law was repealed and replaced in 2013 with a law that requires the complainant to collect signatures of 10% of the school district's population to prove discrimination. The 2010 law only required 1 petitioner.)
- State Boards of Education with resolutions against Native American mascots: Minnesota, 1988; Washington, 1993 (reaffirmed in 2012); New York, 2001; New Hampshire, 2002; Michigan, 2003 (reaffirmed in 2010); Oregon, 2012 (bans mascots)

School Districts in Massachusetts that have Eliminated Native Mascots (partial list)

- Wellesley, 1988 – Eliminated “red” in “Red Raiders” and changed logo to a pirate.
- Deerfield, 2000 – Frontier Regional H.S. changed Redsk*ns to Red Hawks
- Natick, 2007 – Changed Redmen to Red Hawks
- North Eastham, 2008 – Nauset Regional H.S. eliminated Indian head logo but kept Warriors moniker.
- Montague, 2017 – Turners Falls H.S. eliminated Indians mascot.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

InfoBills291@gmail.com or on Facebook by searching @endracebasedmascots
