

Kansas Advisory Council for Indigenous Education - Working Group
Mascot Reform Statement and Recommendation to Kansas State Board of Education and
Kansas Board of Regents
Approved 9.16.22

As the Kansas Advisory Council for Indigenous Education Working Group, we affirm the rights of Indigenous peoples¹, communities, and nations to have a voice in how they are represented within our institutions of education. There are over 10,000 American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students attending public schools across almost every district in our state, and we recognize how historic policies of removal and relocation in Kansas have created a situation in which we share responsibilities for education decision making across federal, state, local and tribal agencies. Furthermore, we recognize the unique status of Native nations with sovereign and inherent rights to be involved in the education of their citizens. Therefore, we affirm our shared responsibility with Native nations and communities to ensure we are providing a culturally appropriate learning environment for not only AI/AN students, but all students.

In the wake of recent dialogue with leaders from the Native nations currently residing within the borders of Kansas, as well as leaders of American Indian education programs and organizations, we strongly recommend that institutions of education affiliated with the Kansas State Board of Education (KSBOE) and Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), as well as the Kansas Board of Regents (KSBOR), retire American Indian-themed mascots and branding in our state². Furthermore, we commend the schools in Kansas that have already undertaken these endeavors, and we also recognize that this will likely affect KSBOE and KSDE more significantly than KBOR due to the number of institutions found in each system that are currently engaging in the practice.

Rationale:

American Indian mascots and branding practices are part of the educational atmosphere in our schools, and our students, teachers, administrators, and community members learn from them in problematic ways. These practices teach narrow-minded stereotypes that represent American Indians as exotic, warlike people who are stuck-in-the-past, making it difficult for people to understand how American Indians exist in contemporary ways. These practices have been shown through research to be harmful to American Indian students' self-esteem, as well as limit the way that they might see their future achievement-related possible selves (Fryberg et al., 2008). This negative outcome holds true even when the imagery is intended to honor American Indian peoples. The American Psychological Association as early as 2005 described how these practices

¹ We recognize that broad terms like Indigenous, American Indian, and/or Native American, and specific tribal affiliations are used differently in every community, and there are ongoing debates about which terms should be prioritized. As an example, terms like "Indian," "Tribal," and "Native American" are codified into federal law, policies, and bureaucracies, while terms like "Indigenous" tend to be used more often in modern academic research and scholarship. Furthermore, tribally specific phrases such as "tribe" or "nation" vary across communities. Whenever possible, we prefer to use what is preferred by your local Native nations. For the purposes of this document, however, we use various terms because we are speaking to a broad audience across the state that uses a variety of terminologies to describe Indigenous populations.

² We emphasize that this specific recommendation is aimed at schools using American Indian people (Redskins, Warriors, Chieftains, Braves, etc.) for the purposes of mascots and branding. Yet, schools that use other American Indian imagery, such as Thunderbirds, should engage in dialogue about the appropriateness of this practice. As an example, while Thunderbirds are affiliated with a variety of Native cultures, the imagery often associated with Thunderbird branding is more commonly tied to spiritual and/or artistic expression from Native nations and artists in the Pacific Northwest. Some of those images may be considered sacred symbols that have been taken and misused without any dialogue with relevant nations or communities associated with that imagery.

“undermine educational experiences of all communities – especially those who have had little or no contact with Indigenous peoples” and create “unwelcome and ...hostile learning environments for Native Americans” (p.1). Additionally, other research has shown how exposure to American Indian-themed mascots increases the likelihood that students stereotype other ethnic groups (Kim-Prieto et al., 2010).

We recognize that the choice to continue these practices, even when intending to honor, often has a ripple effect to other schools through sports competitions and league rivalries. As an example, one school may choose to keep American Indian-themed imagery as part of their brand, and also work to educate the students and community about how to express school spirit in respectful ways. However, these images and branding practices evoke the worst versions of these stereotypes in the bleachers and pep rally signs of rival schools, usually under the guise of school spirit and friendly competition. Specifically, these mascots prompt students to dress in fake stereotypical Indian clothes, to make fake Indian noises and chants, and write jokes about “sending them back on the trail of tears” and “scalping the Indians” on pep rally banners. Furthermore, these branding practices prompt non-American Indians to claim Native cultural symbols in unwelcome ways. Beyond the problematic practice of imitating American Indian chanting or singing through stereotypical caricatures, this branding practice also encourages students, staff, and community members to claim to be “tribal elders,” host “tribe time,” call younger generations “papooses,” make inappropriate “powwow” references, or create other unwelcome practices. In other words, these stereotypical branding practices ripple outward and affect Native students, faculty, and staff attending schools that do not have American Indian-themed mascots. These are not acceptable behaviors in Kansas schools, particularly as they relate to KSDE’s emphasis on improving social-emotional learning. We condemn any practice related to these types of behaviors.

Furthermore, we recognize the unfortunate reality that most of our teachers, administrators, and school board members working in schools that use this form of branding and imagery are not affiliated with American Indian communities; yet they are also the individuals making decisions about retiring and/or keeping American Indian imagery and branding. **As the Kansas Advisory Council for Indigenous Education Working Group, which includes American Indian representatives from our Native nations currently residing in Kansas and other Indian education leaders throughout our state, we ask that our state leadership do what is within its power to help eliminate the use of American Indian-themed mascots and branding in our schools.**

With this recommendation, we understand that many institutions of education may need some time to engage in community education and stakeholder dialogue to understand this issue more deeply, while also addressing concerns related to rebranding costs. Knowing this, we ask that KSBOE and KBOR take the following actions:

- 1. Affirm this statement.**
- 2. Review KBOR, KSBOE, and KSDE policies with specific attention to how the practice of using American Indian-themed mascots and branding may be in conflict with goals related to student learning and well-being.**
- 3. Ask that schools review their policies, as well as improvement plans, to determine if they are in conflict with goals related to student learning and well-being. This includes schools that may not have an American Indian-themed mascot or brand, yet are still affected by the mascots and branding of other institutions.**

- 4. Ask that schools with American Indian-themed mascots and branding retire these practices as soon as possible. When more in-depth community engagement and long-term planning is necessary, ask these institutions to develop plans to retire these practices within the next 3-5 years.**
- 5. Develop a support network for schools that may need help transitioning away from American Indian-themed mascots and branding. This includes helping school leaders have access to content area experts, as well as helping them connect with other school leaders who have already been involved in transitioning away from American Indian-themed mascots and branding. KACIE-WG is willing to support these efforts, as well.**
- 6. Explore funding opportunities to help institutions transition away from American Indian-themed mascots and branding issues.**

As found below in this document, this stance on American Indian-themed mascots aligns with similar statements from the Kansas Association for Native American Education (KANAE), the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), the National Indian Education Association (NIEA), the American Psychological Association (APA), the Kansas Governor’s Commission on Racial Equity and Justice, along with hundreds of other organizations nationwide. The NCAI, in particular, is tracking state level activity on mascots nationwide (NCAI, 2022), showing how states and districts are confronting this issue and retiring these practices. They are tracking the many districts that have retired these mascots, including Kansas schools, and they also show how some states have banned the use of Native mascots by passing laws. As an example, Maine passed a law in 2019 prohibiting this practice, and Maine now has zero schools in their state using American Indian mascots or branding. We recognize that not all American Indians agree on this issue, but recent research from Fyberg, Eason and Brady (2021) indicated that the more strongly individuals identified as Native American and the more they are engaged and active within Native communities, the more strongly they opposed Native-themed mascots. Considering this, as well as the request to retire these practices from the leaders of our Native nations in Kansas, and the clear opposition from American Indian professional organizations, we are asking that our institutions of education in Kansas retire these practices as we all do the continuous work of improving our schools. In other words, American Indian leaders in our state have indicated that these are their wishes, even if non-Native educators’ and community members’ intent is to honor them.

As indicated by the NIEA statement on mascots, an important distinction needs to be made, however, when Bureau of Indian Education schools (administered by federal and tribal governments) choose to employ this type of branding. In these unique cases, there is a layer of self-determination and representation that is absent from most other schools making decisions about Native-themed branding. These schools are run by American Indian community leaders, and within them they offer a much more culturally relevant and robust learning environment that connects their Native students to Indigenous customs, languages, arts, sovereignties, and much more. In other words, it is their choice to represent themselves in this way, and they have the local knowledge and cultural expertise to ensure their learning environments go much deeper than a stereotypical moniker as learning unfolds every day in their institutions of education. Because educational institutions in Kansas under the federal umbrella are out of the jurisdiction of KSBOE, KSDE, and KBOR, this advisory council believes their local governing structures comprised of all-Indian boards, should have the authority to make those decisions.

Furthermore, we recognize that the stereotypes inherently associated with American Indian mascots and branding are also found in our curricular systems, as well as textbooks and other media used in our schools. We, as the Kansas Advisory Council for Indigenous Education Working Group, recognize that there is a parallel need for curricular reforms, which we intend to address moving forward through ongoing dialogue with American Indian nations, communities, and stakeholders.

We look forward to our ongoing collaborative work as we all work to improve how our educational systems serve all our students.

Other Institutional Statements on Mascots

Kansas Association for Native American Education (KANAE):

<https://coe.ksu.edu/collaborations/partnerships/kanae/documents/KANAE-Statement-American-Indian-Mascots-Branding.pdf>

National Congress of American Indians (NCAI):

<https://www.ncai.org/policy-issues/community-and-culture/anti-defamation-mascots/resolutions>

AND

<https://www.ncai.org/proudtobe>

National Indian Education Association (NIEA):

<https://www.niea.org/niea-resolutions-2013/support-for-the-elimination-of-race-based-native-logos-mascots-and-names>

American Psychological Association (APA):

<https://www.apa.org/about/policy/mascots.pdf>

Kansas Governor's Commission on Racial Equity & Justice (2021 Report – see p. 25)

https://governor.kansas.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CREJ-Report-December-2021_FINAL_Print.pdf

For a much more complete list of institutions that have come out against American Indian mascots and branding, see:

<https://www.changethemascot.org/supporters-of-change/>

References

American Psychological Association. (2005). Summary of the APA Resolution Recommending Retirement of American Indian Mascots. <http://www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/indian-mascots.aspx>

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Fryberg, S. A., Eason, A. E., Brady, L. M., Jessop, N., & Lopez, J. J. (2020). Unpacking the Mascot Debate: Native American Identification Predicts Opposition to Native Mascots. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550619898556>

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National Congress of American Indians – NCAI (2022). Ending the Era of Harmful “Indian” Mascots. Retrieved May 1 at <https://www.ncai.org/proudtobe>. Additional State Activity Tracker information found at <https://ncai.org/Ending.Indian.Mascots.Initiative.State.Activity.Tracker.pdf> and https://www.ncai.org/NCAI_School_Mascot_Tracking_Database_-_Overview_and_Numbers.pdf