

Native American mascot debate: Racism vs. community and school pride

Bill Doyle | Jun 30, 2019

Administrators in some Central Massachusetts school districts with Native American mascots and logos believe they should get rid of them, but others insist such a decision should be left to their communities.

On Tuesday, Native Americans from across the state voiced their support for bills filed to ban public schools from using Native American mascots, logos or nicknames to the Joint Committee on Education at the State House in Boston because they found them to be demeaning.

State Reps. Nika Elugardo, D-Boston, and Tami Gouveia, D-Acton, and state Sen. Joanne Comerford, D-Northampton, recently filed bills to order such a ban. A similar proposal two years ago failed to become law.

North Brookfield High School's nickname is the Indians, and Principal William Evans believes it should be eliminated.

Asked if he thought the mascot was racist, Mr. Evans replied, "I think it's open to be interpreted that way and so, therefore, it should be changed. I don't believe that people who have worn the Indians logo on their uniforms or that the people who have created Native American imagery in our school are doing it from racist belief. They do that because of identity, pride and tradition without the thought of, 'Oh, is this offensive or is this appropriate or can it be interpreted as racist?' I don't think anybody really thought of it that way. The fact that it's being raised in that perspective I think should give people pause and people should consider, 'Huh, Is this appropriate?' And I think an honest evaluation of it would be, 'No, it's not.' "

North Brookfield's mascot is a Native American wearing a headdress.

"There's no spear imagery of war or violence," Mr. Evans said. "I would say that it's a dignified image. Nonetheless, it's certainly not indicative of the current community. Like all the other Native American nicknames, it was born in a different time."

Mr. Evans realizes that people in town have grown attached to the Indians nickname.

"The older people say, 'It's been this way forever,' " Mr. Evans said. "'What's the problem now? All of a sudden, we're racist?' I think that would be a lot of the feedback. So it's up to the younger people to say, 'No, we don't think you were racist. We think that it can be interpreted that way and so, therefore, it should be changed.'"

The athletic teams of Bartlett High in Webster are also nicknamed the Indians.

End is near?

"I've worked for 13 years at schools with Native American mascots," Bartlett High Principal Peter Cushing said, "and quite honestly I think the practice needs to come to an end."

Previously, he taught at Arlington High, which has a kneeling Native American on its logo, and served as a vice principal for the Narragansett Regional High School Warriors and as principal for the Narragansett Middle School Warriors.

According to Mr. Cushing, two or three years ago, Bartlett met with members of the Nipmuc tribe and changed its logo from a Native American with a headdress to a B with a feather hanging off the left side of it. The nickname is still the Indians, however, and the Native American in headdress is still pictured on the gym floor.

"With everything going on about bullying," Mr. Cushing said, "with everything going on in the news media about separations that we're facing, shouldn't we as schools be doing more to try to bring people together? Have dialogue,

have conversations and maybe there's a common ground where these logos can be used or can be shifted to be used so that it's not disrespectful."

Changing a mascot could be expensive. Mr. Cushing estimated the cost of resurfacing a gym floor as \$16,000 to \$17,000 and of purchasing new uniforms for a sports team as \$3,000 to \$5,000 and far more than that for football, which has many more players. According to the bill, public schools could continue to use Native American uniforms and signage until they wear out.

Mr. Cushing will leave Bartlett this week to become assistant superintendent in Medford. Medford High's mascot is the Mustangs.

Unlike Bartlett and North Brookfield, Algonquin Regional and Narragansett Regional are named after Native American people. The mascot name for Algonquin Regional, situated in Northboro, is the Tomahawks. Narragansett Regional is situated in Templeton and its mascot name is the Warriors. They look at their mascots as more appropriate and as a way to honor the Native Americans.

"It's not like we're showcasing the chief's headdress with no history to it," said Algonquin Principal Sara Praguski Walsh. "There is history to Algonquin, there is history to how it's used here."

Ms. Praguski Walsh said Algonquin teaches a class called "Silenced Voices," which explores how minorities have been marginalized through history and ways to rectify their treatment. The students study the history and meaning of the tomahawk and are taught to respect it. She also said many years ago the school changed the name of its newspaper from the Smokestack to the Harbinger.

No Tomahawk chops

Ms. Praguski Walsh said Algonquin students are not permitted to perform tomahawk chops or any inappropriate chanting during games.

"The flipside is there is a whole history of what happened to the Native Americans," Ms. Praguski Walsh said, "and how they were treated, and not losing sight of that, and the importance of understanding their journey, and their perspective of seeing the use of the tomahawk or the use of the name Algonquin, which is a Native American tribe, could be disrespectful. So we do a lot of work here at the school on that."

Algonquin's logo consists of two crossed tomahawks with feathers hanging off of them.

If the state bans use of Native American mascots, Ms. Praguski Walsh said Algonquin would adjust.

"If that occurs," she said, "it would be a community, collaborative approach. Like we really own the Algonquin name and the application of the Tomahawk as a tool, if that time comes we will own the next name and school logo."

When Christopher Casavant became Narragansett Regional School District Superintendent of Schools during the 2016-17 school year, the high school had two logos, one a capital N with a spear running across it, and the other a Warrior, a traditional Native American in a headdress.

So students, staff and the public were polled. Of the 2,058 responses, the Warrior prevailed 52% to 48% and was officially adopted.

"They were proud of the logo and being part of the Narragansett school district," he said. "It was named out of respect of the Narragansett Indians who populated this area and others. People felt it was a respectful representation, certainly not demeaning."

Mr. Casavant said he understands the concerns of the Native Americans, but he feels no groundswell of support to drop Warriors as a nickname.

“This is their identity, the folks here,” he said, “and I think they should at least have a say.”

Long history

Native Americans have had a long history in Massachusetts, which is an Algonquin Native American word meaning “large hill place.” Pictured on the state seal and flag is an Algonquin Native American with a bow and arrow and flag. The arrow is pointed down, signifying peace.

Nearly 40 high schools in the state have Native American mascots or logos, including 11 in Central Massachusetts. In addition to the Algonquin Tomahawks, the Bartlett Indians, the Narragansett Warriors and the North Brookfield Indians, Central Mass. has the Athol Red Raiders, the Assabet Valley Tech Aztecs in Marlboro, the Grafton High Indians, the Nashoba Regional Chieftains in Bolton, the Nipmuc Regional Warriors in Upton, the Tantasqua Regional Warriors in Sturbridge and the Ware High Indians.

Athol High’s Red Raiders logo is a caricature of a Native American wearing a headdress and dancing while holding a tomahawk and a spear. Athol town manager Shaun Suhoski didn’t want to speak for the regional school district, but said he didn’t see any harm in having a discussion about whether the logo needs to be changed.

Fitchburg High is also nicknamed the Red Raiders, but the mascot is not a Native American.

In the western part of the state, last year Turners Falls changed its nickname from the Indians to the Thunder, and last month Mohawk Trail retained its Warriors nickname, but removed all Native American imagery. Also last month, Maine became the first state to ban the use of Native American mascots in its public schools and colleges.

“This change is going to happen,” Mr. Evans said. “Other schools, other districts have taken it on and made the change. It’s a wave that’s moving so I expect it will happen. If it’s coming from outside the community and it’s a state mandate, I think that will actually be easier for the community to manage instead of having an internal debate which I think could be very divisive.”

Mr. Casavant feels differently about the state getting involved.

“You shove it down folks’ throats then it obviously becomes a mandate,” he said, “and it becomes harder to manage.”

Mr. Evans’s last day as principal at North Brookfield was Thursday. He’ll become principal at Easthampton High School on Monday. Easthampton’s mascot is an Eagle.

“Nobody’s offended by eagles,” he said. “They’re majestic, they’re beautiful. They don’t care. It’s a lovely thing.”

Native American mascots – honoring culture or symbol of disrespect?

Allison Torres Burtka | Tuesday, April 24, 2018

With football season now underway, mascots like the Washington Redskins – and media outlets calling them by that name – brings renewed focus to the use of Native American mascots. James Riding In, a founding member of Arizona State University’s American Indian Studies Program and a citizen of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma, says the use of the name is unacceptable. “I flatly reject the contention of team owners and sports fans that American Indian-oriented team names, logos and mascots in professional and amateur sports pay homage to Indian bravery and courage,” Riding In told ASU Now. “Their so-called honoring celebrations of Indian heroism are not only misguided, harmful and offensive to Indians but are also inextricably tied to this nation’s history of racism.”

This baseball season, the sleeve of the Cleveland Indians’ uniform displays “Chief Wahoo” – a caricature of a Native American with red skin and a toothy smile. But the team is removing it from the uniform, starting in 2019.

Native American groups and several other organizations have been saying for decades that such caricatures are degrading. While the logos have their fans, the tide has turned swiftly toward removal.

“Major League Baseball is committed to building a culture of diversity and inclusion throughout the game,” Commissioner Robert Manfred Jr. said in a statement in January. He acknowledged fans’ attachment to the Indians’ logo and noted that “the club ultimately agreed with my position that the logo is no longer appropriate for on-field use in Major League Baseball.” The logo will remain on some fan merchandise.

In Washington, D.C., many Washington Redskins fans sing “Hail to the Redskins” without giving the team’s name or logo a second thought, but the team is under pressure to get rid of both. Dozens of media outlets have refused to use the word “Redskins” at all, because it is a racial slur, but team owner Dan Snyder has repeatedly said they will never change the name.

So what’s in a name or a mascot? Chief Wahoo and the Redskins may be the most prominent examples, but many teams have mascots, names, and practices that incorporate or mimic native cultures. Current team names range from local tribes, like the Central Michigan Chippewas to the “Savages,” which some high schools still use. While the use of the term “savages” can be offensive to native people, the harm runs much deeper than that, and it spreads beyond native people, advocates say.

Psychological harm

“The social science research and literature on this is pretty overwhelming that the use of these caricatures is bad for everyone. Particularly, it’s bad for children,” said Bryan Brayboy, President’s Professor of Indigenous Education and Justice in the School of Social Transformation at Arizona State University. For native kids, it damages their self-esteem, he explained. “For non-native kids, it largely inures them toward racism toward native people. It ends up giving them the sense that native folks and peoples are a thing of the past or are to be caricatured, so they are less likely to have empathy with native peoples, and they come to see us as these relics of the past and stereotypes rather than vibrant, viable, productive human beings.”

In 2005, the American Psychological Association (APA) called for schools and teams to stop using American Indian mascots, symbols, images and personalities because they harm native young people’s self-esteem and social identity development and undermine the learning environment for everyone—especially people who don’t have much exposure to native people. “The symbols, images and mascots teach non-Indian children that it’s acceptable to participate in culturally abusive behavior and perpetuate inaccurate misconceptions about American Indian culture,” the APA says. These practices also amount to discrimination, which can lead to negative relations among groups.

This imagery shapes how non-native people view native people even when the stereotypes are positive, and regardless of intent. One study found that these mascots subconsciously reinforce stereotypes, even with only incidental exposure. It found that people who live in cities with teams with Native American mascots were more likely to think of Native Americans as warlike.

These names and images demean native people and say: “They’re not like you and me, they’re ‘other’—they’re dehumanized,” said Victoria Phillips, professor at American University Washington College of Law, who coauthored the report “Missing the Point: The Real Impact of Native Mascots and Team Names on American Indian and Alaska Native Youth.”

And this harm adds insult to injury, as many Native American communities are struggling, advocates say. “These communities are still dealing with ongoing legacies of colonization—poverty, depression, alcohol and drug and domestic abuse,” said Victoria Jackson, a history professor at Arizona State University. “These harmful stereotypes and caricatures don’t do any good for communities that we should be doing more to care for—and whose sovereignty and humanity we should respect.”

A report commissioned by the Oneida Indian Nation found that “Native American people exhibit the highest level of psychological distress of any other group in the nation, including among the highest levels of depression, substance abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder.”

Part of the reason is the stress caused by ongoing discrimination, the report says, and “anything that causes additional stress and increased suffering, loss of productivity, loss of functioning or further loss of life among Native Americans, and is preventable, must be considered a public health priority.”

Native people also face high rates of hate crimes, according to the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI).

Saying goodbye to mascots

Dartmouth College and Stanford University stopped using Indian mascots in the 1970s. Brayboy pointed to them as examples, noting that they initially faced opposition from alumni and others. “I think the evidence seems to suggest that people move on from that—the affinity is with the school rather than the mascot and the caricature itself,” he said.

In 2005, the NCAA issued a policy discouraging member schools from using “hostile and abusive racial/ethnic/national origin mascots, nicknames or imagery.” Uniforms could not display such images, and they had to be covered if the school hosted a championship event. The NCAA listed 18 schools that used these names and images. Ten made changes, and three kept their nicknames but stopped using them to represent Native Americans. Five—the Catawba College Indians, Central Michigan University Chippewas, Florida State Seminoles, Mississippi College Choctaws, and University of Utah Utes—showed that they had received local tribes’ approval and kept their names.

Honor?

Most schools and teams that use these names and mascots say they do so to honor native people. Their proponents—including both native and non-native people—agree. Groups supporting Chief Wahoo and the Redskins say they have deep emotional connections to them and the teams’ history.

The Native American Guardians Association is an alliance of natives and non-natives whose goal is “to preserve positive honorable symbols and imagery, as well as tributes to Native American culture in the American mainstream.” The group has argued that a proposed bill banning the use of Native American mascots from Massachusetts public schools discriminates against Native Americans because it prevents only them from being represented. The group says that mascots should be used to educate people about Native American history.

The effect of these names and images is harmful even with well-intentioned uses, critics say. The NCAI has noted that, “rather than honoring Native peoples, these caricatures and stereotypes are harmful, perpetuate negative stereotypes of America’s first peoples, and contribute to a disregard for the personhood of Native peoples.” Jackson added that these images are “attached to this longer history of ideas about savagery.”

The Florida State Seminoles work closely with the Seminole Tribe of Florida to ensure that the school’s use of the mascot is respectful. But that tribe doesn’t speak for all Seminoles. Some in Oklahoma don’t condone the use.

Also, Phillips pointed out, “You can’t control fan behavior.” So even if a team’s representation is vetted and approved by a tribe, that doesn’t mean fans won’t dress up in body paint and do the “tomahawk chop” in the stands, she said.

Some commentators have called for the University of Notre Dame to drop its Fighting Irish nickname because it also constitutes an ethnic stereotype. But the situation isn’t the same, Jackson said. “It speaks to who is in charge of the decision around the mascot and the name,” she said. “The consensus among Notre Dame fans with Irish identity is that it’s a point of pride, and that’s almost always not the case with Native American fans of teams that have Native American symbols,” or Native Americans who aren’t fans.

The Washington R-words

Defenders of the Redskins’ name cite a Washington Post poll that found 9 out of 10 Native Americans are not offended by the name. But the poll’s methodology has been criticized widely.

The Oneida Indian Nation’s report argues: “Native Americans are the only group in the United States subjected to having a racial slur as the mascot of a prominent professional sports team. The Washington football team, whether it intends to do so or not, is contributing to prejudice and discrimination against Native Americans by persisting in using the ‘R-word.’”

“The name itself means a bounty for killing a native person,” Phillips said.

The case *Harjo et al v. Pro Football, Inc.*, sought to cancel six Redskins trademarks because they disparage Native Americans. The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office’s Trademark Trial and Appeal Board sided with the Native Americans, but that decision was overruled and the Supreme Court chose not to intervene, leaving the trademarks in place. Phillips, who worked on the case, explained: “We should not sanction and give the government imprimatur on something that strips another human being of their dignity. And that’s what I really feel that that the R-word and imagery of the Washington football team does.”

Looking ahead

“Will there will be a time when these mascots are a thing of the past? I hope so,” Brayboy said. “At some point, Amos ‘n Andy and Sambo kind of went away.”

Brayboy thinks more teams are likely to shed their Indian names and mascots in the coming years, but he added, “Traditions are pretty sticky, persistent, intransigent things.” Dealing with these issues requires people to have “honest conversations about what those mascots are and what they represent, and dig into what it might mean for people’s perceptions of indigenous peoples.”

Phillips is optimistic, in part because this country’s demographics are changing quickly and will soon be majority minority, and people who have faced similar treatment are less likely to go along with marginalizing native people, she said. “There just won’t be team owners who are as insensitive as some of the current owners are.”

“Those of us who don’t like these mascots, who object to their use, aren’t trying to dampen people’s fun or to disrupt their love of team,” Brayboy said. “What we’re really doing is trying to reframe the conversation and say our children deserve better, and your children deserve better.”