

Buffalo News

New York closer to eliminating Native American logos and nicknames in schools

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Apr 18, 2023 Updated 3 hrs ago



New York State school districts with Native American mascots will have two years to end the use of the Indigenous imagery under regulations expected to be approved Tuesday.

The Board of Regents is scheduled to vote on the proposal outlined in November that prohibits schools from using Indigenous names, logos or mascots. The state Education Department has long held that the mascots should go, maintaining they can create a hostile environment that causes emotional harm to students.

A small number of schools in the region have Indigenous names or logos, including the Cheektowaga Central Warriors, with the head of a

Native American man with a braid and a feather on his head. The Tonawanda Warriors logo is a capital "T" in a circle with two feathers on the circle. West Seneca West High School teams are called the Indians. The logo for the Iroquois Central Chiefs is a Native American with feathers.

The student body of the Salamanca City School District on the Seneca Nation Allegany Territory is 35% Native American. A Seneca artist designed the logo for the district's sports teams, the Warriors, which is a representation of a male Seneca.

West Seneca has started phasing out its logo. Iroquois is starting to plan for the day its competitive teams will no longer be known as the Chiefs.

"People in Iroquois feel very proud of what we've had, and rightfully so, and I think we've tried to treat it honorably and respectfully," Superintendent Douglas Scofield said at Wednesday's School Board meeting. "But I also think, overwhelmingly, people understand that we also have to be respectful of other individuals, too."

Under the proposed regulations, school boards must commit by June 30 to eliminate the use of logos, mascots and names by June 30, 2025.

The regulations clear up some ambiguities that surfaced in November's memo to school districts.

Indigenous name, logo or mascot does not mean a public school, school building or school district named after an Indigenous tribe. It does mean a "name, symbol, or image that depicts or refers to Indigenous persons, tribes, nations, individuals, customs, symbols, or traditions, including actual or stereotypical aspects of Indigenous

cultures, used to represent a public school, including but not limited to such schools' sports teams."

Scofield, the Iroquois superintendent, said he has met with members of the student cabinet about the change, and students also want to include the community, at large, in the process.

Students want the new name to be unique in Western New York, and they want to retain the color red for the new imagery, he said.

Scofield said he believes the change can be accomplished for Iroquois by the start of the 2024-25 school year. Under that timeline, this year's juniors and seniors would graduate as Chiefs, and this year's sophomores would be the first to graduate under the new name.

Work, such as removing the logo from the gymnasium floor, could be done during the summer of 2024, he said. Most of the cost, estimated to be about \$500,000, is for uniforms for sports teams. Scofield said there already has been discussion that any uniforms that would be ordered before a new name is chosen be free of Native American imagery.

While they have not settled on a timeline for the process of eliminating the imagery, he said it makes sense to wait until September to get into full gear.

"What I keep hearing from the community is 'When, when, when? What's it going to be? How's it going to be?' " Iroquois School Board President Jane Sullivan said. "I think this will give them some idea."

Board Member Sharon Szeglowski said the board vote in June is whether to follow the state regulations, not to change the logo.

School Boards and superintendents who do not comply with the elimination could face ouster by the state and a removal of state aid under state law.

"If we don't vote to follow the state regulation, we lose our funding and we all lose our board seats, and we lose a superintendent," Board Member Louise Toth said. "We really have no choice."

The state held a 60-day comment period, and the Education Department included its response to some comments, including that the logos and mascots are intended to honor Native Americans.

"The department's proposed rule is based upon the harmful impact of Indigenous mascots, not the avowed intentions of previous or current school district officials," the state Education Department said in its comments section.

When asked if photographs, awards and other memorabilia should be removed, the state responded: "The intent of this regulation is not to pretend that Indigenous mascots were never used, but to eliminate their use going forward. Harmful as they may be, the use of indigenous mascots, like the forced relocation of Native American tribes, is a historical fact that must be acknowledged."

Recognized tribes could have Indigenous logos, names and mascots, and they could grant written permission for a school district to use a Native mascot, logo or name.