

Testimony in Support of LD944: An Act to Ban Native American Mascots by Representative Benjamin Collins by request of Ambassador Maulian Dana of the Penobscot Nation

Submitted to: The Education and Cultural Affairs Committee

March 25, 2019

Senator Millett, Representative Kornfield, and Honorable Members of the Committee,

Thank you for taking the time to consider this important legislation and for taking public input at this stage of the bill. I know better than anyone that this is an issue that stirs passionate debate on both sides and I encourage you to consider not just the sensationalized nature of people debating a controversial topic but look closer and examine the facts and realities. I will present many factual arguments as to why this bill is the right move for Maine and also my perspective as an Indigenous woman who has grown up in a reservation community and raises my children in that community, children who are Penobscot Citizens and at ages 10 and 12 will be high school students very soon. This bill is important for us all on a policy level but deeply important to me personally.

Let's start with facts. You will hear many opinions on this today and some of them will try to discredit the factual evidence we can provide. It is a fact that Indian mascot use is harmful and adds to the intergenerational trauma of Indigenous people. It is a fact that we have the highest rates of suicide of any group. It is a fact that children as young as 8 have suicidal ideations in our community. It is a fact that we suffer high rates of alcoholism, drug abuse, mental health struggles, and poverty. It is a fact that the societal acceptance of Indian mascots increases the impact of all of these plagues on our people. When people see us as less than human they treat us as such. When people steal and misuse our identity they render us and the totality of the Indigenous heritage and experience invisible. When you think you can call yourself an "Indian" because it is your high school mascot it is a fact that you are carrying out racism and privilege against those of us who are actual Indians and have requested that you stop your behavior. It is also a fact that under Maine law it is a crime to identify as a tribal nation when you are not one. It is a fact that many scholarly studies have been done on this and all of them have called for the end of Indian mascot use because of the harm it causes to Indigenous students and all students. It is a disservice to the people of Maine to allow a harmful practice in the schools. I will provide these studies as supporting documents to this testimony.

I started my activism around Indian mascot use when I was in high school and watched the Nokomis Warriors play the Skowhegan Indians play a basketball game. I was watching at home with my father who was Chief of the Nation at that point so I had a front row seat to many of the issues facing the Wabanaki tribes of Maine the battles over constantly defending our homeland, river, and inherent sovereignty. When we sat down to watch the game together I experienced a turning point in my life. The fans, students, bands, cheerleaders, and some players from both teams were exemplifying all the reasons that Indian mascots are harmful. Among the shocking behaviors I witnessed there were fake feathers, fake Indian regalia, fake war chanting and stereotypical hand motions, hand over the mouth Hollywood Indian war whooping, and silly looking dancing. A gymnasium full of people of all ages from two communities in my state were all mocking and marginalizing the existence and culture I had been taught to respect and honor things that I held so close to the roots of my identity. I was hurt, I was confused, and I was angry.

And I wasn't alone. I was able to be mentored and supported by various adults that were fighting to work to end these mascots and I started a now two decades career educating on these mascots and how they affect my people and advocating for their removal so that Indigenous people in Maine have equality and are not discriminated against or degraded because of our race. We are the only group that is used in this manner. Often times people point to Vikings, Cowboys, or Irish themed mascots so invalidate our fight but these other groups are occupations or Nationalities. We are the only racial group used this way.

The most challenging case I have seen in my lengthy work on this both prior to my Ambassador appointment and during is the Skowhegan High School mascot. After a long and messy battle the school board voted last month to retire the Indian mascot and this made national news and is widely celebrated as a great thing for Maine and part of what we hope is a new dawn in tribal state relations. A resistance has formed in a group calling themselves Skowhegan Indian Pride. The name is misleading seeing as how the Skowhegan area and surrounding districts are less than 2 percent Native American according to recent census data. They are protesting the mascot removal and attempting to essentially blackmail the school board by making problems for the budget to pass in the town unless the mascot is reinstated. Passing this bill would free up the good people of MSAD54 from this nonsense and allow them to focus on education and the important duties of a school board. Skowhegan Indian Pride has been operating as a racist organization since the 2015 vote that the school board made to keep the mascot. They have produced memes mocking alcoholism in Indigenous populations, suggested that I personally should be raped and "passed around a tipi" and that my body be traded for "beaver grease", they have used slurs against Indigenous people on numerous occasions, threatened to intimidate me with a "scalp towel" (a relic from Skowhegan games many years ago depicting a hand holding a clump of hair which is a reference to the torture, murder, and hunting of Wabanaki Nations of Maine), and many more aggressive and racist statements emboldened by their mascot. Now that they don't have it anymore they are attempting to manipulate the processes of the district under watch of elected school board members.

However this bill is not about Skowhegan. This bill is about landmark legislation that sends a message of truth, honor, respect, and a clear message that Maine will not support racism and that the government represents all of its citizens. These mascots are changing all over the country and other states are looking into statewide bans. In Cleveland the "Indians" baseball team has agreed to retire the racist 'Chief Wahoo" because of pressure from Tribal Nations and this is a huge step that we hope to keep chipping away at a national level. There is also a battle going on against the Washington DC football team who funds an organization name Native American Guardians Association (NAGA) in order to make it look like Indigenous People are accepting of their racial slur mascot. NAGA has also made an appearance in Skowhegan. They are not affiliated with any Indigenous Nation and some of their members have been proven to be lying about their heritage. This is a very widespread and complicated battle over these mascots and Maine has a chance to be a leader for the Nation in taking a stand over removing this racist practice from learning environments.

I regret not being there in person for the hearing but our circle of support has grown into a movement and we will be represented very well. I would love to meet and discuss this bill with any of you personally and will attend the work session. I am out of town for a family matter but will be back very soon. Thank you for reading and I hope you listen with an open heart and mind to the request of all the Tribal Nations of Maine that we do not want to be a mascot.



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR-ELECT

170 State House Station | Augusta, Maine 04333

Janet T. Mills
Governor-Elect

December 6, 2018

RSU 54/MSAD #54 School District
Skowhegan Area Schools
Attention: Board of Directors and Superintendent Colbry
196 West Front Street
Skowhegan, ME 04976

Dear Chair Ring, Vice-Chair Charles, Superintendent Colbry and Members of the SAD 54 School Board:

I am writing to share my thoughts as the Board meets today to reconsider its 2015 vote to retain Skowhegan Area High School's Indian mascot and logo. I recognize that this is your school, and the logo is a great source of pride for this community. I also respect that the decision about the future of the mascot is yours to make, as it should be, and I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to express my thoughts on the matter.

As you know, many other school systems in Maine have wrestled with whether Native American mascots and imagery should be removed or changed to avoid causing unintentional offense. These decisions are difficult and emotional for many reasons. Our schools are often central to the identity of our communities. Indian mascots often were originally chosen in an effort to recognize and honor an area's unique connection to Native Americans. It can be difficult to accept that a gesture of respect made in good faith could have the opposite of its intended effect. But we have heard now from Maine Tribes, clearly and unequivocally, that Indian mascots, while meant to serve as a tribute, are instead a source of pain and anguish. I hope that that perspective is given great weight in your deliberations this evening.

On a more personal note, as you may know, I have deep ties to the Skowhegan community, having practiced law there for 14 years, and I have great affection for the hard-working, thoughtful people of the Skowhegan area. It is an extraordinary community. A mascot, of course, is a symbol of pride for any community. But it is not the source of its pride. The source of pride for a community is its people. While tonight you weigh a change in symbol, I hope you will remember that changing your mascot does not change you as a people. You are what makes the fabric of this community strong. If you select a new mascot, although difficult, I know this community will imbue it with that same deep pride.

I believe you have before you tonight an opportunity to demonstrate to our children and grandchildren that the community is capable of making difficult and uncomfortable decisions – but that, when made, those decisions bend toward justice, toward healing, and toward inclusivity. These are values worth imparting to our children, and they are values I believe this community holds dear.

I offer these views to you respectfully and I thank you for your consideration.

Very truly yours,

Janet T. Mills
Governor-Elect
State of Maine

JTM/mao

cc: Maulian Dana, Tribal Ambassador, Penobscot Nation

To Leadership of MSAD 54 School System,

Your "Indian" mascot is the last one of it's kind in the State of Maine which you share with five tribal reservation communities. Mascot use has been found to be harmful to children and create an unhealthy learning environment as well as shaping their views of Indigenous people to be stereotypical and not based in reality which is problematic for their Indigenous peers and hinders their development. Mascot use also leads to increased racial tensions as we have seen play out in the years since MSAD 54 voted to keep the Indian mascot. There have been offensive posts to social media celebrating the "scalp towel" which used to be used at the high school games and is a reference to the genocide of Indigenous people. There was the local business promotion entitled "hunt the Indian" by the Skowhegan Chamber of Commerce that was a perfect example of the ignorance fostered by these mascots. The event was cancelled due to public outcry all over Maine and beyond and they issued an apology and pulled together to try to determine how to make Skowhegan a place more welcoming for all races. Hunt the Indian was especially horrific because of the slaughter that occurred of Native people at Norridgewock in the 1700s which is in your district. Your mascot is used, whether you are aware of it or not, to perpetuate and celebrate violence and racism against the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Micmac, and Maliseet people of Maine and our ancestors.

You have been asked numerous times to consider this change and in 2015 after a lengthy collaboration between tribal people and your school board you voted narrowly to keep the mascot. Now three years later there have been changes made in Nokomis and Wells High Schools that removed Native imagery from their "Warriors" mascots. This makes you the last school in the state and it is a great opportunity to finally do the right thing and make our state a place where every student regardless of race can go to school in a safe place that does not dehumanize and cause harm to them.

Maine communities and Tribal Nations are improving relationships through continued education and communication. Columbus Day has officially been changed to Indigenous Peoples Day in many towns and cities in Maine and this has led to a wave of respect and pride in all citizens as we correct a narrative that has oppressed us and limited understanding between races. Changing the last Indian mascot will make you a true leader and a shining example of how to unite and empower people who may have differences but can see common humanity. This is something we all desperately need more of in the world today.

We have been hurt by your behavior in the past but still we extend a hand of unity and peace. We do not want to raise our children to fear or distrust your children. We want our culture and life ways respected and not mocked and degraded by your institution. We don't want to be hunted, we want to be heard.

On behalf of the Penobscot Nation, I thank you for your consideration and I honor your truth as I hope you will mine,

Maulian Dana, Ambassador Penobscot Nation