

August 5, 2010

Mr. Thomas Birmingham, Chair  
Sheepscot Valley Regional School Unit #12 Board  
69 Augusta Road  
Whitefield, ME 04353

Dear Mr. Birmingham:

I write to express the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission's request that Sheepscot Valley Regional School Unit #12 (RSU 12) stop using the sports name redskins and any associated artwork, imagery, or references to that name. Please share this letter with your fellow board members and Superintendent Greg Potter.

The Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission (MITSC) consists of 13 Commissioners, six Commissioners representing the State of Maine and six Commissioners representing the Wabanaki signatories to the Act. I serve as the elected Chair of the Commission. We exist to monitor the effectiveness of the Maine Implementing Act, the companion legislation to the 1980 Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act. Besides our obligation to monitor the implementation of the Act, by statute the Commission shall continually review "the social, economic and legal relationship between the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, the Passamaquoddy Tribe and the Penobscot Nation and the State."

The Commission's duty in part to monitor the social relationship between the signatories to the Act causes us to ask that RSU 12 cease using the offensive name redskins. MITSC strives to strengthen Wabanaki-Maine relations whenever we can. One source of tension in the tribal-state relationship involves some Maine schools' use of offensive sports mascots and nicknames referencing or associated with Indigenous People.

Last May we co-sponsored along with the four Wabanaki federally recognized tribes and a number of religious and non-governmental organizations a symposium titled "Respectful or Disgraceful?: Examining Maine School Use of Indian Nicknames and Mascots." Wabanaki elected leaders, educators, tribal officials, and historians along with other Indigenous People described the many harmful effects of Indian nicknames and mascots. The symposium generated considerable news coverage and editorials by the *Times Record* and *Bangor Daily News*.

People attending the May 15 symposium along with MITSC Commissioners concur that the most offensive of all Indian related nicknames currently used by Maine schools is redskins. Many people consider redskins an ethnic slur in the same category as “chink” or “darkie” (see Brief of Psychology Professors As Amici Curiae in Support of Petitioners in Harjo v. Pro-Football, Inc.). Quoting from the same brief, “Social science research shows that the use of ethnic slurs like “redskin” perpetuates harmful stereotypes and leads to discrimination.”

The RSU 12 website states part of the body’s mission is “to educate each and every student to the fullest of his/her potential.” Yet research shows the negative effects of Indian sports mascots such as Redskins “impose harmful psychological costs on American Indians in general and on American Indian children and young adults in particular” (see Brief of Psychology Professors As Amici Curiae in Support of Petitioners in Harjo v. Pro-Football, Inc. p. 14). RSU 12’s continued use of the sports nickname redskins compromises its ability to fulfill its educational mission for every child, especially those of Native American ancestry.

Psychologists specializing in the harmful effects of stereotypes cite possible harm to Indian culture by the use of such names as redskins. One of the stated purposes for passing the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act (MICSA) included guarding against the acculturation of the Wabanaki or anything that could disturb the culture or integrity of the Indian people of Maine. The use of the sports nickname redskins poses the potential to harm individual Wabanaki and Wabanaki Tribes as a whole. Some individuals in the targeted group can respond by hiding their Indigenous identity to protect themselves from further harm. One of the Indigenous panelists at the May 15 symposium described how she resorted to that highly painful act when in high school to escape from the abuse directed at her because of her Indian identity. Only in the relatively safer environment of college did this individual reassert her Indigenous identity.

For all these reasons, we trust that the RSU 12 Board will move quickly to discontinue its use of the redskins nickname. MITSC stands ready to assist you with any information you feel that you might need to take action. We believe nobody would purposely continue an action that could harm an entire people. MITSC encourages RSU 12 to join the many other Maine schools that have abandoned offensive Indian mascots and names in favor of more appropriate alternatives.

Sincerely,

Jamie Bissonette  
Chair, Maine Indian Tribal-State  
Commission

Cc: Angela Faherty, Commissioner, Maine Dept. of Education  
Patricia Ryan, Executive Director, Maine Human Rights Commission

