

# Last Native American mascot is dropped from Maine public school

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Native American imagery in sports mascots has been an issue for many indigenous rights groups. This protest against the Washington Redskins happened Nov. 2, 2014, but the team name still remains one of the most controversial. Photo from: Wikimedia Commons/Fibonacci Blue.

Twenty years ago, Maulian Dana was watching a Maine high school basketball game between two teams called the "Indians" and the "Warriors." She noticed the kids in the student section, who were chanting and dancing with fake feathers and war paint on their bodies. Dana is a member of the Penobscot Nation, a Native American tribe in Maine. It was the first time she saw things she knew as sacred to the Penobscot Nation being mocked and disrespected.

Dana, who was 15 at the time, felt angry and shocked by what she saw, but she turned her frustration into activism. Today, Dana represents the Penobscot Nation as a tribal ambassador. She led the creation of a new bill signed into law May 16, 2019, by Maine's governor, Janet Mills. The law prohibits the use of Native American mascots in all public schools, colleges and universities. Maine is the first state to pass such a law.

"It means the world to me," Dana said in a telephone interview. "I'm really happy for all the tribal leaders in Maine that came together and all of our allies and friends and Governor Mills."

The bill, which passed unanimously, will become effective 90 days after the state Congress closes for the term.

Schools will have to get rid of any images or team names that use Native American tribes, individuals, or traditions. The rule also applies to mascots, nicknames and logos.

### **Respecting Native Americans' Wishes**

Mills has recognized that in the past, Native American mascots were used to "honor a school's unique connection to Native American communities in Maine." However, she says that Maine's tribes have made it clear this is no longer true. "A mascot is a symbol of pride, but it is not the source of pride," Mills said. "Our people, communities, and understanding and respect for one another are Maine's source of pride. It is time our symbols reflect that."

Maine made headlines in March 2019 when the school board in Skowhegan voted to retire the Native American mascot at Skowhegan Area High School. It was the last high school in the state with a Native American mascot.

There have been protests to bring back the Skowhegan mascot. Still, Dana says the new law seems to have ended the mascots for good.

"I think on the federal level something should be done as well," said Maine Congressman Benjamin Collings, who supported the bill and is encouraging other states to follow Maine's legal actions. "In Maine, we just realized that it is a distraction, is harmful and not needed. We wanted to affirm what every town in the state has said so far. It is harmful and there is no place for it."

Darren Ranco leads Native American Programs at the University of Maine. He says that the publicity surrounding the Skowhegan case was one reason the mascot ban passed. In addition, the people of Maine have been pushing to ban Native American mascots for about 20 years, which also helped lead to the passage of the ban. Earlier in 2019, Maine became one of several states to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day. These states celebrate the indigenous people who lived in the Americas before Columbus arrived, instead of Columbus himself.

### **Ban Comes At Right Time**

Ranco has taught about this issue for 15 years and has overseen research on the topic. He says that politically it was the right time to pass the ban. "If we were going to do a law like this, this would be our opportunity. It was a unique set of factors."

The ban was supported by studies and research over the years, Ranco adds. One study was a 2005 report by the American Psychological Association, which called for the immediate end of all Native American mascots, symbols, images and personalities. The report stated that these mascots taught misleading, stereotypical and harmful ideas about Native Americans.

"These are actually harmful for Native American children in particular," Ranco said in a telephone interview. However, he also noted that the mascots are harmful to all children because they give a false idea of an entire group of people. Ranco added that native peoples in Maine have been

actively trying to get rid of the mascots. They've made a huge effort to educate the public about the issue.

Ranco and Dana are hopeful that the bill passed in Maine will spark more activism in other states. They think it's possible there could even be new laws for banning Native American mascots. Several states have similar restrictions, while others have called for the end of the use of mascots.

Dana says that she was often teased and laughed at in high school for being Native American. Back then, she never could have imagined a law banning Native American mascots. "We've definitely come a long way," Dana says.