

Senate Bill 251 Hearing Testimony:
From: Dr. Michelle Maher

My name is Dr. Michelle Maher. I am a former Assistant Professor in the Graduate School of Education and Counseling at Lewis & Clark College. I hold a Ph.D. in Education. I am a former high school principal and mathematics teacher. I write to you today as an Oregon citizen concerned about the racialized messages all youth endure. I ask you to please join with the NCAA, National Education Association, American Psychological Association and many more organizations that have banned American Indian mascots for all public schools.

I am a teacher educator. Public schools carry an ideology of safety, social justice, and merit. I hope to be able to defend your actions to these students. I need you to create a legal framework that students can see as respectful to all people. Significant research has demonstrated that American Indian mascots not only harms American Indian youth but encourages racist attitudes among young people in school.

I had the honor of testifying at the ODE hearing with my former student, Naomi Strawser (now 26 with 2 children) a Tlingit tribal member. Naomi testified that she didn't bring her children to protect them. She didn't want Angela and Robert (10 and 12) witnessing adults supporting the rallying cries often heard at sporting events, which sound something like "Kill or Crush the Indians." Such phrases are just about identical to the genocidal notion and policies of "kill the Indian and save the man." Children like Angela and Robert live with survivors of Indian boarding schools.

Senate Bill 251 condemns all youth to witness sanctioned attacks on American Indian stereotypes which contradict anti-bullying policies. SB 251 directly endorses American Indian stereotypes only and therefore targets American Indians. Senate Bill 251 is an embarrassment to the school districts trying to find a back door to the Oregon Department of Education police. It is a waste of your time.

I need you to leave the stagnancy of antebellum tradition behind and be a national leader at the forefront of innovation which includes non-discrimination and refuses to let school districts take a back door to the Oregon Department of Education policies that ban Indian mascots. Make decisions that teacher educators' can easily defend to their classrooms.

Dear Oregon State Board of Education

I am an Assistant Professor in the Graduate School of Education and Counseling at Lewis & Clark College. I hold a Ph.D. in Education. I am a former high school principal and mathematics teacher. My Mom is Blackfoot Cree French Italian and English. My Dad, Tsalagi and Swedish.

What I have learned as a school administrator is that I can strategically choose how I interpret and apply school policies and practices. There is a Supreme Court case that reminds me of this in relation to the mascot issue. It is a case of a boys' basketball team that wins their division title and competes in a league outside of their area, which is in an all Black neighborhood. When the boys get there, the Black coach demands that these boys prove they are boys and they take them into bathroom and force them to show that they are boys. The Supreme Court decided that racism and sexism has nothing to do with that case. It doesn't make sense does it? Why would these boys have to prove their sex?

But does this case make sense when replaced with a Native girls' basketball team that plays an all-White league, and they are forced to prove to a White coach if they are Native girls or boys? The coaches are either so unfamiliar with American Indians that they believe our boys and girls to be indistinguishable or they were so unable to respect the humanity of 9-11 year-old girls that they were willing to strip them of their dignity to win a 5th grade basketball game.

This is sexism and racism. The belief in racial and sexual superiority is intimately related to both of these possibilities. Of course the first example was fictitious, but it allows you to see the real 1999 U.S. Supreme Court's decision that sexism and racism was not present, when in fact it was. As I am sure you are aware, experiential burdens that American Indian and Alaska Native youth, contribute to an already bleak picture with among the highest youth suicide, poverty and dropout rates.

Take one step toward changing the reality for these youth. Because your job asks you to understand institutionalized discrimination in order to make good decisions, I trust you will waste no time in changing the culture of schools, given any resistance. Take one step and remove Indian mascots as an overt reminder of these youth's disenfranchisement.

What I have learned as a school administrator is that I can strategically choose how I interpret and apply school policies and practices. Please choose to remove racism from your policies and practices. I am an Assistant Professor who teaches teachers. You are role models to the students I train. Gain their respect now. Walk your talk. Be the change that your own policies say you uphold:

racist free schools. I want to be proud of Oregon's Dept of Education and brag about it to my students.