

Testimony to the Oregon Senate Education Committee, Wednesday May 29, 2013

Chair Gelser, and members of the Education Committee:

My name is Jesse Keen. I am here to ask you to reject Senate Bill 215A and to uphold the ban on Indian mascots in Oregon schools. I am a mother of one, soon to be two, and a supporter of the right to safe school environments for all children. Race-based stereotyping creates an unsafe school environment, and infringes upon the civil rights of students to an education free of discrimination. Recent bills introduced would add exceptions to the ban with local Tribal approval, but I believe this is inadequate protection against the harm done to our students.

We know from the research that race-based Indian mascots, team names and symbols are harmful to children. The American Psychological Association, the National Education Association, and the US Commission on Civil Rights have all ruled firmly on this issue. These images and team names represent overt and covert racism: even those that claim to be respectful are romanticized, distorted views of the rich histories and vibrant cultures of Native people today. The mascot ban is not a rejection of Native American cultures: it is an invitation to cultivate a deeper relationship between Oregon schools and Tribes, one that does not rely on mascots and images that are proven to cause harm. The original ban enacted by Oregon's Board of Education was based on solid evidence and research: I challenge the supporters of the new bills to provide research to support their side, rather than anecdotal evidence and resistance from school officials who were already given a generous timeline to enact this necessary change in their schools. We know change is hard. That should not stop us from enacting change when it is the right thing to do.

I believe these bills are flawed because no one Tribe should be able to grant the usage of a broad, generic name like "Braves" or "Indians." These names are broadly applicable to any Tribe. Even the NCAA grants exceptions to their mascot ban ONLY when a Tribal Nation grants the use of a specific name, such as the Florida State Seminoles and the Central Michigan University Chippewas. No one in Oregon is using the name of a specific Tribe. By allowing Tribes to grant the usage of broad, generic names, Oregon will continue to infringe upon the civil rights of Tribal and non-Tribal students to an education free from race-based discrimination. How is this a step forward? Our Board of Education took a strong and well-researched stand on this issue when they enacted this ban. I urge you not to take a step backward, for the sake of equality and safe schools for every child.

Thank you.

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