

Native Graduation is a Cause for Celebration:
Decolonizing Beaverton School District's Graduation Policies
A White Paper -Brandon Culbertson

"The principal said I have to make sure that (my eagle feather) is hidden and that nobody can see it and it is out of sight. It makes me feel like I have to hide who I am."
-Wavery Wilson (Fort Belknap Community)

Graduation should be a time for families to come together in celebration, honoring their students' achievements as they move forward into their next phase of their lives, a rite of passage. For Native students and families, this is a particularly joyous occasion given that Native students are less likely to graduate from high school than their peers. Unfortunately, within the Beaverton School District many Native American students and families are left feeling upset and diminished by various high school policies barring them from wearing eagle feathers during this culminating event. These policies function as modern-day acts of educational assimilation.

The harm caused Native students at graduation stems from inequitable standards around graduation policies, which infringe on the civil liberty of Native students. Rather than a clear district policy that affirms Native religious freedom, individual school administrators create rules and policies on an ad hoc basis, case by case, leaving Native families uncertain whether they are free to exercise their religious rights. Importantly, district policy and practice appear to value Native religious and spiritual beliefs less than other religions, as they are held to a different set of standards. It would be unthinkable to deny Jewish students the opportunity to wear their yarmulkes. Or could you imagine prohibiting Muslim females from wearing a hijab during graduation? These are hard scenarios to envision, yet annually Native students and their families within the Beaverton School District must choose between conflict or conformity.

Rather than put students and families in this position, I argue that the same standards should be applied when taking Native American ceremonial attire into consideration. Without such standards, district policy and practice will continue diminish Native students' cultural identity.

For too long American Indian and Alaska Natives have been subjected to religious persecution so deeply engrained within American Society that it took an act of congress in 1978 to relinquish the prohibition on such activities:

"The law was enacted to return basic civil liberties to Native Americans ... allow[ing] them to practice, protect and preserve their inherent right of freedom to believe, express, and exercise their traditional religious rights, spiritual and cultural practices ... and the possession and use of objects traditionally considered sacred by their respective cultures."

The ability to wear eagle feathers, or other traditional regalia at graduation, aligns with this Act protecting Native religious, spiritual, and cultural freedom. Moreover, as the table below

illustrates, this right is of the highest importance to Native students and families in the Beaverton School District.

Scholastic achievement and career choices often can mean more than the act of receiving a diploma in some respects. Seeing yourself on stage wearing a gifted eagle feather from your family may very well serve as an impetus for motivating younger Native students to succeed. Such visibility for younger Native students is especially important given lower graduation rates.

Unfortunately, as it stands, district policy and practice continuously ignore our desire to create an inclusive environment for Native students and causes them additional stress towards the knowledge that their Native identity is not valued at their graduation. For many this additional stress at the end of their educational journey requires more energy than is left, after having fought to graduate in a system that often seeks to diminish their identity. Another impact of this practice is the triggering of feelings around historical traumas associated with longstanding US policy of using educational assimilation as a dehumanizing colonial weapon; a living memory within many of our district AI/AN families. Leaving our students resentful and angry at the institution of education at this stage in their lives does a disservice to all the years of preparation and work it took to get them to the point of graduation. Stigmatizing education to this degree is quite literally a crime, a legal liability as well as a public relations nightmare. This is cause for unnecessary stress and humiliation as it cuts right to the heart of whose traditions and religious items are of value.

“When given in honor of a graduation ceremony, the eagle feather also recognized academic achievement and school-related success. Eagle feathers are worn with pride and respect.” -Isidro Gali, Vice Chairperson of the Pit River Tribe

“Schools should respect the request of Native American Students who want to wear an eagle feather during graduation” -ACLU

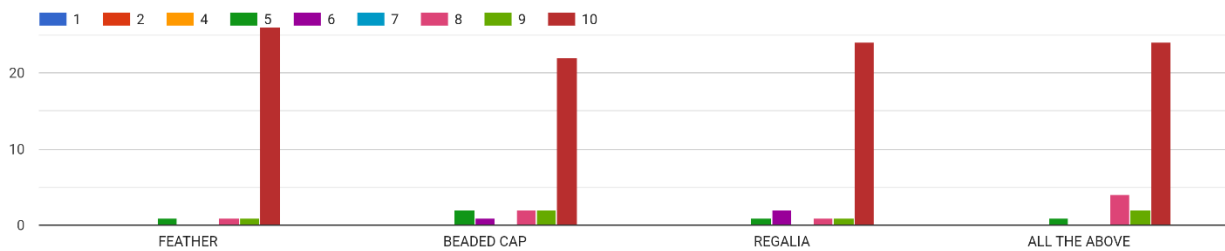
“While dropout rates are significantly high in Indian county, graduation is a time that we honor those who bring us honor with their individual successes.”-Seahdom Edmo-Shoshone Bannock, Nez Perce, Yakama& Celio Falls decent

Often these institutional slights bringing about feelings associated with the generational historical education-based trauma many Natives have had to endure i.e., assimilation. The cause of this stress is simple: student’s not being allowed to wear eagle feathers and or tribal regalia at graduation on par with other religious garb tolerances. The fix is simple: allow Native students access to their religious freedoms during graduation through wearing eagle feathers and or culturally relevant tribal regalia. There is no cost to the district. Many other districts around the US and state allow for such practices, it is time for BSD to join their ranks. At times meaningful equity requires actionable policy changes, the time for this inclusive shift is now.

“Many tribal nations highly revere and hold sacred eagles and their feathers. Eagle feathers represent honesty, truth, majesty, strength, courage, wisdom, power and freedom. Native peoples believe eagles have a special connection with God as they roam the sky. Federal law and policy have long recognized this religious importance.”

Data collected from 33 Native students, guardians and parents at the AI/AN honoring ceremony June 5, 2019 @ the MLD

On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest level of importance) how important is it for Native American graduates to be allowed to wear an eagle feather, beaded cap, regalia or all the above at Beaverton School District graduations?



Beaverton School District 5-year data	2013-2014 percentage	2017-2018 percentage	2017-2018 Oregon Graduation Rate
All Students	79.7	86.4	78.7
Economically Disadvantaged	66.3	75.8	72.4
Ever ELL	65.2	81	76.2
Limited English Proficient	48.1	62.8	55.8
Students with Disabilities	62.3	64.3	60.6
American Indian/Alaska Native	63.6	68.8	65.3
Asian	92.9	94.8	90.6
Black	63.8	81.7	68
Hispanic/Latino	61	76.3	74.6
Multi-Racial	83.7	89.6	78.4
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	52.4	75	75.4
White	84.5	88.9	80.1
Female	84	88.8	82
Male	75.7	84.2	75.6
AVID	*	86.4	*
Career Technical Education (CTE)	n/a	98.5	92.8
Talented & Gifted (TAG)	96.9	97.5	95

*AVID Program first graduating class was in 2018. AVID graduation data not reported to state.

4 Year Cohort Graduation Rates							
9th Graders Entering in:	10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14	14-15	15-16	16-17
Students graduating during or before:	13-14	14-15	15-16	16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20
All Students	79.7	81.3	83.1	85.9	86.4	85.6	
American Indian/Alaskan Native	63.6	71.4	57.1	61.5	68.8	90.0	
Native American/Indian Ed/Tribal Enrollment						90.6	

5 Year Cohort Graduation Rates							
9th Graders Entering in:	09-10	10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14	14-15	15-16
Students graduating during or before:	13-14	14-15	15-16	16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20
All Students	82.1	84.2	85.9	87.1	88.9	89.1	
American Indian/Alaskan Native	61.5	80.0	78.6	62.5	61.5	73.3	
Native American/Indian Ed/Tribal Enrollment							

Fewer than 20 students

Data demonstrating the importance of culturally responsive/adequate data collection as well as the importance culture plays within AI/AN academic achievement as 96% of BSD Title VI AI/AN students graduated on time within the 18-19 year.



BSD 18-19 AI/AN graduates during community honoring ceremony

References:

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