

Testimony in support of HB 2052

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Leya Descombes

Many Nations Academy Senior

Why we need to allow regalia for graduation ceremony

Chair Dembrow, members of the committee, my name is Leya Descombes, I am Inupiat and a student at the Many Nations Academy, and I'd like to speak to you about my personal perspective on allowing regalia and traditional clothing for graduation ceremonies in Oregon.

We have been forced to meet the definition of "civilized" by a culture outside of our own. For years and years so many Native youth and elders were, and continue to be, pushed to conform to western ways— to manifest a destiny that was never ours and to see the world through a forced upon colonial perspective. We are still combating the traumas our elders, my elders, experienced from residential and boarding schools; scared to teach their own children and grandchildren our Native language, culture, medicine, practices, and ways of life. We were beaten, burned, and even killed if we didn't speak English, or didn't practice the bible, or even if we dressed in our Native clothing. Although we are no longer in that time, or experiencing that history, that trauma is nonetheless passed down and alive.

Currently, my brother and I attend different schools, and because I attend a culturally specific school, NAYA's Many Nations Academy, when I graduate I will get the honor of wearing my kuspuk and mukluks with pride because I am helping change the perception and representation of Alaskan Natives in education. Whereas my brother's public school does not allow their Indigenous students to wear traditional clothing for graduation – he will not be allowed to wear a kuspuk, he will instead be forced to wear a graduation robe and will not be able to represent his culture on one of the most significant days of his life. Our regalia is important to us to represent our cultural background, and the significance this day has for both of us during our graduation.

Not being able to wear something so special to our people is heartbreaking. There is an unjust standard in mandating everyone to conform to clothing from a culture that is not their own, rather than a symbol of celebration that is culturally significant to our families and ancestors – to perpetuate conformity as equality is a practice of cultural erasure. When we graduate we are showing that even after years of hate, pain, and being looked down upon we are still thriving and adapting – to be unapologetically Native while beating a system designed to suppress people it was never created to support.

When it comes time for my brother to graduate, I don't want traditional clothing to be a topic of conversation that must pass through an approval process, but rather a norm and an expectation. I want him to be able to take pride and joy in representing our tribe while at his graduation ceremony. I want to know that when I have kids they will be able to do the same and wear our regalia with pride while connecting with our ancestors.

Please pass this bill so my brother gets the honor as well to wear his kuspuk and walk across the stage. Thank you for taking the time to listen.