

Efforts gain steam to end schools' Native American mascots & nicknames

By John Hilliard, Globe Staff, Updated June 25, 2020, 4:06 p.m.

High school nicknames and team mascots depicting Native Americans have long been decried by tribal leaders and others as hurtful, racist stereotypes. But now, because of the Black Lives Matter movement, advocates said a national reckoning on race could help drive support for long-sought changes.

In recent weeks, thousands of people in Greater Boston have signed petitions or gone on social media to protest the use of Native American imagery by school sports teams. Organized efforts are underway to remove names such as North Quincy Red Raiders, Millis Mohawks, Braintree Wamps, Tewksbury Redmen, and Winchester Sachems. The petitions have yet to be presented to local officials.

In the state Legislature, meanwhile, advocates are urging lawmakers to strengthen a bill intended to bar schools from using Native American mascots.

Such changes are long overdue, said Faries Gray, sagamore — or war chief — of the Massachusetts Tribe. “These mascots create such a negative environment for the indigenous [people], it is ridiculous that we even have to have a discussion about why this is a racist thing,” Gray said. “That is not our culture. It is really disrespectful to us.”

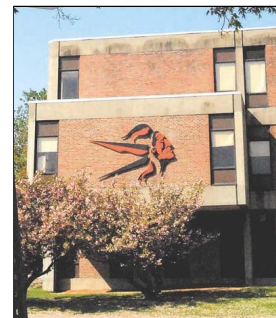
Efforts led largely by young people, spurred by larger fights against systemic racism, are underway to change these names. Lauren McDowell, 18, is part of a group of students building support for replacing the “Sachems” nickname at Winchester High School.

Their work began just as the Black Lives Matter movement gained steam after the killing of George Floyd, a Black man, by a white police officer May 25 in Minneapolis, and its influence has made many receptive to the group’s arguments, said McDowell, who graduated from the school this spring. “It doesn’t portray native people in a positive light,” McDowell said of the mascot. “I think a lot of kids who wear the logo, and say, ‘Go Sachems,’ every single day, don’t understand the history.”

In Quincy, Kuan Lee, 19, who graduated from North Quincy High School last year, is among those calling for an end to the school’s “Red Raiders” nickname and its “Yakoo” mascot.¹

The mascot is a caricature of a longtime school benefactor, portrayed shirtless, wearing a feathered headband, and carrying a tomahawk in one hand and a spear in the other.

“I don’t think this mascot represents Quincy,” Lee said. “I think Quincy is more welcoming and more progressive than a man holding a tomahawk.”



¹ Yakoo, the school mascot created in 1957, is a caricature of a North Quincy High graduate, Dr. Allan Yacubian, a retired dentist who has been a longtime booster of school programs. When Yacubian attended North Quincy High, a fellow student drew a profile of Yacubian as part of a contest to create a new mascot for the Red Raiders football team. Yacubian, whose family is respected in Quincy, is actually of Armenian descent.

In 2017, Yacubian made a \$400,000 donation for 5 college scholarships for Quincy students each year. “We owe him a debt of gratitude,” Mayor Tom Koch told the School Committee.

The US Dept of Education in the past had asked the school to voluntarily remove the mascot and in 1995 the Boston office of the federal civil rights office also found the mascot to be offensive, but legal, given free speech rights. The response to a proposed name change has been intense, with many people defending Yakoo and others saying it’s past time for a change.

Melissa Harding Ferretti, chairwoman and president of the Herring Pond Wampanoag Tribe, said in a statement that Native peoples throughout the United States have fought for decades to end the use of “Indian” mascots, calling the imagery deeply offensive and harmful to the well-being of indigenous peoples. Activists and educators have worked hard to educate Americans about the racist ideas ingrained in such images. “But here we are again today, working to educate Euro-Americans and government officials about the blatant and destructive racism of such images and sports teams’ mascots,” Harding Ferretti said in the statement. “My hope is that the Massachusetts legislature will listen and learn — and will finally do what is right and just.”

The state Legislature is considering a bill to prohibit the use of Native American mascots by public schools. But the bill’s original language specifically outlawing Native American imagery was removed in committee. Instead, broader language was inserted that prohibited public schools from using “an athletic team name, mascot, or logo which denigrates any racial, ethnic, gender, or religious group,” according to the legislation’s text. The concern with that change, according to advocates, is that schools could argue that their mascots are not intended to denigrate Native Americans.

The legislation’s lead sponsor, Senator Jo Comerford of Northampton, wants to restore the original language, a spokesman said. “We have seen this legislation as racial justice and civil rights legislation from the beginning, and now we are in a political and social moment where people are rising up and demanding that their government takes action to address racism and inequities that have been present and visible in our society for far too long,” Comerford said in a statement.

Senate President Karen Spilka supports reinserting the language around Native American depictions, a spokesman said. “The Senate is proactively looking at this important piece of legislation,” he said.

A review this week by the Globe found 37 schools in Massachusetts with teams using nicknames with Native American ties, including 11 uses of “Warriors,” eight teams called “Indians,” four each called “Sachems” and “Red Raiders,” and three teams named “Chieftains.”

Other Massachusetts teams play as “Tomahawks,” “Aztecs,” and “Braves.” At one high school, which uses the profile of a Native American man as its logo, teams use the nickname “Brownies.”

Joseph P. Gone, a Harvard professor and faculty director of the university’s Native American Program, along with two other researchers, examined the results of studies that looked at how these nicknames and images impact Native students. Their findings showed a negative effect: It was demonstrated that if Native students are exposed to these stereotypical portrayals, they can develop limitations on how they imagine their own futures and possibilities, Gone said. The irony of this is that those experiences occur in schools, he noted. “Education is all about cultivating opportunity, and harnessing potential, and building possibility for young people to thrive,” Gone said. “And those very same institutions, when it comes to Native students, are too often supporting the kind of images that often restrict the possibility of Indian people to grow and develop.”

Rhonda Anderson, a member of the Iñupiaq-Athabaskan Native American tribe, grew up in Western Massachusetts and remembers the Native American mascots that were featured at two schools she attended in the 1980s.

One of them had a large mural depicting a Native man. The imagery would make her feel ashamed and angry; at rallies, fellow students would wear war paint and chant.

Such imagery creates a stereotype that is unrelated to the diverse cultures of Native Americans, said Anderson, who represents Western Massachusetts on the state Commission on Indian Affairs. There are hundreds of federally recognized Native nations today, and compressing them all into a single warrior caricature means real Native people are being ignored. “We are still here, we’re not going anywhere, [but] we’re being erased by these inaccurate representations,” Anderson said. Instead of clinging to racist stereotypes, she said attention should be paid to Native Americans: “Listen to us, we’re speaking.”

At the local level, activists said they are working for those changes, but there has been pushback.

Grace Morris, 18, is working to convince Tewksbury officials to abandon the town's "Redmen" nickname. More than 14,258 [people have signed her petition](#). "I personally believe using an oppressed group of people as a mascot is very racist," Morris said in an e-mail.

Meanwhile, an anonymous "Redmen" supporter collected about 1,505 [signatures backing keeping the name](#). "We cannot change everything in the world to accommodate for the few people that get offended by it. The fact is, not many people are offended by it," the petition said. "Native Americans come into our school to teach us about the name and what it means."

In Braintree, Lauren Kaye said the national movement inspired her to take action against the high school's "Wamps" nickname. Over the past two weeks, more than 11,141 [have signed her petition to change the school mascot](#). The 22-year-old, who graduated from Braintree High in 2016, said the town must move on from the mascot. "It would show the community has been able to be self-reflective, that we have separated ourselves from the nickname, and are ready to make change, and make our town more inclusive," Kaye said.

In Millis, where teams play as the "Mohawks," more than 3,459 people [have backed a petition](#) by Rebekah Kohls to remove the nickname. Native Americans "have been requesting the removal of all 'native mascots' since the 1960's. I hope our communities hear their voices," she said in an e-mail.

Millis School Committee Chairman Marc Conroy said the issue of the nickname was not currently before his board. "If and when it is, I expect the committee will invite both proponents and opponents of a change to present information and take the matter under consideration," he said.

Michelle Bergstrom, chairwoman of the Winchester School Committee, said she supports the students who have been leading community discussions about the Sachem mascot. "I expect the Winchester School Committee will hear from them soon about how they feel the mascot represents Winchester High School," Bergstrom said. Officials in Quincy, Braintree, and Tewksbury did not respond to a request for comment.

Gray, with the Massachusetts Tribe, is hopeful that the nation's new focus on the impacts of race and prejudice will lead to a meaningful change in how non-indigenous people interact with Native Americans. "It's a tremendous loss: It's a rich culture that the indigenous have," Gray said. "And we would love to share."



SOURCE: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/06/25/metro/wake-black-lives-matter-renewed-push-end-schools-native-american-mascots/>

Reading Questions:

1. Why is there a renewed interest in changing Native American mascots in the past 2 years?

2. Who are some of the people leading the charge to change the mascots AND what's motivating them?

3. The MA state legislature is currently considering weighing in on this issue. The text of the updated bill says:

[Bill H.581] Chapter 71 of the General Laws is hereby amended by adding...

Section 98. (a) The board of elementary and secondary education shall promulgate regulations prohibiting public schools from using an athletic team name, logo, or mascot which names, refers to, represents, or is associated with Native Americans, including aspects of Native American cultures and specific Native American tribes. The board shall establish a date by which any school in violation of said regulations shall choose a new team name, logo, or mascot.

- a. What would this bill do if passed into law (in your own words)?

 - b. What do you think about this approach? Should the state legislature pass a law OR should school mascots be decided at the local level?
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4. What is the impact of these nicknames and images on Native students?
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5. The article closes on various statements by school committee chairs who mention a desire for town-wide discussions of the issue. How do you think that approach is likely to go? Will that bring about a resolution to the issue?