

February 12, 2018

Dear Members of the Board of Education:

As a graduate of Mason City schools and a parent of current students, I respectfully ask the Board of Education of the Mason City Community School District to begin an intentional process to:

1. Obtain a written statement demonstrating full approval and support from the Mohawk Nation Native American tribal council for our current and continued use of the name “Mohawk,” including any variations of that name, such as the name “Mo the Hawk,” and “Mohawk Nation,” and make this document readily accessible to the public via the school district’s website; and
2. Make financial arrangements to appropriately compensate the Mohawk Nation tribal council, or its designated beneficiary, for the use of their name, at a level the tribal council feels is fair; and
3. Invite the Mohawk Nation tribal council into a level of ongoing partnership and participatory oversight over whether, when, and how the term “Mohawk” is used by our school district, such as specific merchandise or event planning.

These three steps are the framework used by Florida State University and the Seminole Nation tribal council to create a positive and education-focused partnership and mutually beneficial relationship surrounding the usage of the Seminole name. A detailed explanation of this process can be found at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/24/sports/ncaafootball/amid-rising-discord-over-indian-images-florida-state-has-harmony.html>

I am also asking that if the Mohawk Nation tribal council gives any less than its full and enthusiastic support to our current and continued use of these terms and any related imagery, that the Board

4. take immediate steps to change the name of the Mason City High School sports teams, and to find a name which is unaffiliated with any racial or ethnic group.

According to the Iowa State High School Athletic Association, the authority for determining the name, imagery, and use of a mascot rests with the local Board of

Education. I am providing a proposed list of steps and timeline below to assist in facilitating this process as needed.

Background:

Our school district has recently invested significant time, energy, and financial resources into cultural proficiency training for faculty and staff, in response to findings of shortcomings in its treatment of racial/ethnic minority groups in our community. The training provided by Dr. Trudy Arriaga was excellent and has helped many staff to begin seeing the complexity and impact of cultural proficiency on creating a positive atmosphere for education.

Yet it is hard to ignore the elephant in the room. We cannot accomplish cultural proficiency until we have come to terms with our past and present misappropriation of the name, image, likeness, symbolism, and culture of Native American peoples, namely the Mohawk Nation. We do not have the ethical right, or other reasonable grounds on which to claim the privilege to use the names, likenesses, symbols, or cultural references that belong to any racial or ethnic group, including Native American communities.

I strongly encourage the Mason City Community School District Board of Education to lead the administration and staff of the Mason City Community School District in the following steps toward taking ownership of our past actions, and improving our cultural proficiency with regard to the use of the name, imagery, symbolism, and cultural references rightfully belonging to the Mohawk Nation Native American Community.

It is my understanding that in the past, Mason City schools staff made an effort to reach out to the Mohawk Nation Native American community, presently headquartered in Akwesasne, NY. The outcome of the outreach was believed to be an understanding that the district could use the Mohawk name, but remove all imagery depicting Native American people or artifacts. However, it appears that we may not have gotten the terms of this believed arrangement clearly stated in writing from the Mohawk Nation. My understanding is that we also did not offer an arrangement of royalties or other appropriate compensation to the Mohawk Nation for use of their name or sales of merchandise bearing their name.

Therefore, I am first asking that the Board act without delay to obtain a clear written statement from the Mohawk Nation Native American Community, which demonstrates clear, enthusiastic approval for our district to continue using the term "Mohawk" as our

team name, the ways in which we use the term throughout our district, and specifically connected to the mascot we have chosen. I believe it would be best to send photos of the mascot, “Mo the Hawk,” to clearly communicate our intended usage. We should also offer to pay royalties on the use and merchandise sales of items bearing the name “Mohawk,” at a rate which the Mohawk Nation decides is fair.

If clear, written permission for our current practices is not given, then I believe we are obliged as a school district to do the following:

1. *Immediately*, remove extraneous usage of term “Mohawk” from school district communications, such as #mohawkpride, #mohawkedchat, “Mohawk Nation,” hallway signs admonishing students to “Ride the bus the Mohawk way,” staff/faculty computer passwords for staff portal documents, building signage, letterhead, and all other current usage unrelated to specifically referencing the Mohawk Nation Native American community. These uses do not further an educational purpose for our school district. Consider the positive community-building effects of replacing these terms with, for example, “#masoncitypride” or #masoncityedchat.”
2. *Immediately*, remove the term “Mohawk” and all Native American symbolism from all future apparel and merchandise for MCCSD staff and students. Offer preschoolers and kindergartners a shirt that says something more culturally appropriate and education-focused than “Future Mohawk,” or “Youngest Mohawk.” Consider replacing this language with “Mason City Schools Class of 20__” or even, “Future Graduate.” The simple, overlapping-letter “MC” logo is also a preferable substitute for staff and student merchandise, since it promotes an ethos of community pride and district achievement.
3. *Immediately*, remove the term “Mohawk” from the phrase “Mohawk Athletic Passes” from the front page menu of the Mason City Community School District website, and all other occurrences, and replace with “Athletic Passes,” “MCHS Athletic Passes,” or other more appropriate language. The term, “Mohawk Shop,” also found on the MCCSD homepage a link box for the Mason City Shop, might be replaced with functional descriptive language such as “Spirit Shop,” “MC Fan Shop,” or “Pride Shop.”
4. *Immediately*, retire “Mo the Hawk.” Recognize that a red-skinned bird with a Mohawk hairdo and warpaint-like eyes named “Mo the Hawk” for a team that is still called the “Mohawks” is inherently problematic, and not a culturally proficient

solution for replacement of a Native American likeness for an athletic mascot. A name such as “Mohawk” simply cannot be divorced from its cultural and historical context. We can not say, “It doesn’t mean Native American to us [anymore],” as I have heard said, because the ties to the origin of the name, and any variations or nicknames invoking the name, are too deep and too strong. A replacement mascot can and must be found. A community campaign to brainstorm a culturally appropriate and positive mascot can be a good way to engage the spirit and creativity of the community and Mason City alumni.

5. *Immediately*, update Board Policy 603.4, as found on page 20 of the Elementary Student Handbook on the www.masoncityschools.org website, to include Native Americans as a group to be given special emphasis in multicultural, gender fair education. This is especially important given our history of usage of Native American names and symbolism without compensation or clear tribal support for doing so.
6. *As soon as possible*, develop and adopt a district athletic mascot that bears no likeness, symbolism, nor shared or similar name, nor other reference to a racial/ethnic group. While no mascot is guaranteed to be perfect, recognize that other area athletic mascots, such as “Bulls,” “Mustangs,” “Knights,” “Lions,” “Cardinals,” “Panthers,” as well as mascots chosen by Mason City School District elementary, intermediate, and middle schools, demonstrate a greater level of cultural proficiency as regards the use of ethnic group terminology. *[Within the CIML conference, we are one of only two schools to use specifically Native American and/or ethnic-referenced mascots. Another school district in our conference, Waukegan, intentionally undertook a process to remove Native American cultural references from their mascot and educate their district on the historical Middle English origins of the term, “Warrior,” in 2014].*
7. *As soon as possible*, make a public acknowledgement that from 1860-1978, tens of thousands of Native American children were forcibly deprived of their own tribal identity, names, language, cultural symbolism, practices, and attire, as well as their families and homes, when the U.S. government mandated removal of Native American children and placement in government-run day and boarding schools. Native American children were also often severely physically abused and died of abuse and neglect in these schools. These policies of cultural annihilation and ethnic cleansing substantially destroyed Native American families and communities, and the impacts of that destruction are still deeply felt and lived among Native Americans today. In this light, it is particularly

problematic that a public school district in the United States would use the name, imagery, symbolism, or cultural references of a Native American community, when Native American schoolchildren were denied these basic rights for themselves.

8. *As soon as possible*, promote a level of public awareness appropriate to the task of educating school district students, staff, parents, and other patrons on why it is important to not adopt another ethnic group's name, likeness, symbolism, or cultural references as our own without permission or compensation, and that there is no appropriately respectful, well-intentioned way to create an athletic mascot from an ethnic group which suffered greatly from our nation's actions and policies regarding the treatment of Native Americans, especially without specific written permission and usage agreement.
9. *As soon as possible*, consider offering a letter of apology on behalf of the school district to the Mohawk Nation for our history of unauthorized and uncompensated usage of Native American tribal names, imagery, and symbolism, and encourage members of the community who may also wish to add their names to a collective effort to make amends to do so as well.
10. *As soon as possible*, consider offering to pay royalties to the Mohawk Nation on all past and present sales of merchandise bearing the term "Mohawk" or bearing the likeness of or symbols pertaining to Native American people or cultures, at a level the tribal council feels is fair. Consider also offering a promotion in which community members may trade in their "Mohawk" gear for a discount on new merchandise with a new, positive and appropriate team name, logo, and mascot; or no reference to a team name or mascot but referring to the district only.

It is true that Mason City Community School District has used the Mohawk as a mascot for many years, and there may be Mason City citizens or alumni who feel strongly about retaining the name for the sake of "tradition." However, our world is changing, and as an institution centered on education and broadening human knowledge, we must recognize that long-held traditions sometimes must come to an end for the greater community benefit. I understand that this may not be a popular course of action, and I respect your role and position as elected leaders being asked to undertake a difficult process. However, in the course of pursuing equality and dignity for people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, some issues can not simply be decided on a number of constituent votes 'for' or 'against.'

Let us commit to doing better and being better by 2020, a year rich in the symbolism that by this point in history, we should be able to see cultural proficiency concerns in our district much more clearly, and respond accordingly.

Finally, I want to say that I am deeply grateful for the work that you do as Members of the Board, the time which you invest in thoughtful reflection, and your willingness to hear from constituents. I am glad to have grown up and graduated from this school district, which has significantly shaped who I am, and I am proud to enroll my children in this district as well. I have many teachers, colleagues, and friends within this district, whom I deeply admire and value as part of my daily life. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to our further conversation on this matter. I am willing to assist the Board, school district administration, and other parties with further resources on this issue, or in any other way I can.

Peace,

Rev. Le Anne Clausen de Montes