

Two tribes call state's Native American mascot ban disappointing

Two Oregon tribes say they're disappointed with the State Board of Education's [decision last week](#) to ban Native American-themed mascots in schools.

The [Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians](#), which issued a statement Tuesday, said the decision was made by "people who have no knowledge of Indian communities" and does nothing to address "the real issues of racism." Meanwhile, a spokeswoman for the [Confederated Tribes of Grande Ronde](#) said its council is "very disappointed that they've trampled our sovereignty and have ignored something that our tribes in Oregon have been calling for years, which is a curriculum that accurately describes" Oregon's Native history.

Both tribes had previously opposed a blanket ban, asking the board to endorse an alternate rule that would have allowed local tribes to work with schools on their portrayal of Native culture. The Siletz had hoped their public charter school could keep its Indian chief mascot and that other schools that wished to keep their mascots could do so if they provided cultural studies to combat stereotypes.

Brenda Frank, the chairwoman of the Oregon Board of Education -- and a member of the Klamath Tribes -- said she understood the tribe's concerns but ultimately disagreed.

[The Oregonian's continuing coverage of the efforts to ban Native American mascots in Oregon schools.](#)

"Mascots are a divisive issue to all members," Frank said.

"We're not immune to being on different sides of the line.

"With all due respect... their responsibility is only to their membership and not to the community as a whole. The Oregon State Board of Education

speaks for all students in the state of Oregon."

The board passed the new rule, which may be the toughest in the nation, last week. Under the state's new policy names such as "Indians," "Chiefs" and "Braves" are banned while "Warriors" may stay as long as the logo does not reference tribal customs or traditions. At least 15 schools have to change their mascots before 2017 or risk losing state funding.

The rule was nearly [six years in the making](#). Back in 2006, Che Butler, a member of the Siletz Tribe and a former Taft High School student, brought the issue before the state board. Butler told The Oregonian at the time that he decided to go to the board after his school played the Molalla High Indians. During the game he saw a student dressed in buckskin and fake feathers performing stereotypical Native American dance moves.

The debate leading up to the rule was heated. The board received some 750 comments on the new policy, about 400 of which were in favor of the ban. A public hearing on the subject lasted four and a half hours.

Of the state's nine recognized tribes, Frank said just three weighed in the proposed rule. The Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians wrote to the board in support of the rule.

"I think in general the idea that Native American names are being singled out as mascots is not a good thing," said tribal chairman Bob Garcia. "I know that I have listened to impassioned reports by individual Native Americans that were offended at the way they were being portrayed."

The Siletz and Grande Ronde tribes pushed instead for an amendment that would allow schools to keep their mascots if they collaborated with a representative tribe on positive portrayals or integrated cultural studies to combat stereotypes.

Siobhan Taylor, the Grande Ronde spokeswoman, said tribes should be able

"to address these issues within their territories" and that the board should focus on better educating students about Oregon tribal history. Instead, "they moved ahead with a policy that really is a mandate without any funding," she said, adding that she believed at least six tribes had voiced concern about the policy, not just two.

The board considered an amendment to allow for exceptions, Frank said, but ultimately decided against it. Research showed that even with positive representations, the mascots could be detrimental to Native students and encourage a certain amount of racism, she said. There was also the issue of equity.

"Are we then accepting a certain level of discrimination? Are we accepting certain levels of dehumanizing somebody – a full race?" she said. "We need to be consistent.

The Siletz Tribe, which declined further comment, is in a unique position given that the tribe's public charter school will have to change its Indian chief mascot to align with the new rule.

Their statement questions whether the rule truly addresses issues of racism. Frank said it was simply a step. "Let's just make our path smoother," she said. "Are we going to remove racism? In my lifetime, I don't think so."

The [Oregon Indian Education Association](#), one of the main proponents of the new rule, declined to comment on the Siletz statement. Se-ah-dom Edmo, the group's representative on this issue, has previously noted that the [National Congress of American Indians](#), which bills itself as the oldest, largest and most representative organization in the U.S., has passed a resolution against the practice of using Native-themed mascots. The National Indian Education Association [released its own statement Tuesday](#) lauding the board's actions.

The issue of Native-themed mascots extends well past Oregon. Nationally

discussion about the issue has been happening for decades. The National Congress of American Indians estimates that there are fewer than 1,000 such mascots left nationwide.

Still, the issue remains contentious. In North Dakota, for example, voters will decide next month whether the University of North Dakota should keep its [Fighting Sioux nickname](#).

The NCAA has said the nickname is offensive and will penalize the school as long as it is kept.

-- [Ryan Kost](#)