

Facing a Ban, a School District Fights to Keep 'Indian' Nickname

By COREY KILGANNON · The New York Times · 8 min

[View Original](#)

Residents in a divided predominantly white town in upstate New York are fighting a state ruling to remove the Native American mascot.

residents thought retiring the longtime mascot of the Cambridge Central School District would be a teachable moment, but has been met with relentless backlash. Credit...Cindy Schultz for The New York Times

Cory and Sarah McMillan of Cambridge, N.Y., recoiled when their 6-year-old daughter came home from her first-grade class one day and mentioned that she and her friend were playing “like animals” in a game they called “Savages.”

“Like that,” she said, pointing to the Indian head mascot on her school newsletter.

“We said, ‘This isn’t good,’” recalled Mr. McMillan, 42, who grew up in the rural town of 2,000 people a few hours north of New York City.

The couple joined a local campaign to retire the Cambridge “Indians,” which for more than a half-century has stood as a familiar symbol of school and hometown pride.

The campaign grew more resolute as Black Lives Matter protests raised issues of inequality and as many schools across the state and the country removed Native American-themed nicknames and logos. In professional sports, the Washington Football Team dropped its old name in 2020 and the Cleveland Indians recently became the Guardians.

McMillan, a native of Cambridge, and his wife joined a campaign to retire the local school district's mascot. "I think it will take time to pass for some people to let this go," he said. Credit...Cindy Schultz for The New York Times

But what the McMillans and some others hoped would be a teachable moment in the predominantly white town has been met with relentless backlash: Friendships have been severed and obscene gestures have been exchanged. Lawn signs emblazoned with the logo and a slogan, "Restore the Pride," have become ubiquitous. The same message appears on a billboard near the town's K-12 school.

One opponent of the nickname found a pile of manure left on her lawn.

Many supporters of keeping the mascot have dismissed concerns as political correctness gone amok, a movement spearheaded by a small group of liberals, many of whom have perhaps not lived in town long enough to realize that many nearby districts have similarly themed names, including the Mechanicville Red Raiders, the Averill Park Warriors and the Lake George Warriors.

Duane Honyoust, a Cambridge resident and a member of the Onondaga Nation, said he supported the school district's use of the nickname and logo as a tribute to Native people and a reminder to students of the importance of local Native history.

Regarding the anti-mascot movement, he said, "Once you take references to Native Americans out of the schools, you're starting to erase us."

Each time the McMillans and others get closer to the retirement of the name, the opposition — a strong, solid majority — complicates their efforts.

In June, after months of contested school board elections and combative monthly meetings, the school board voted to retire the name. But a month later, it voted to reverse the decision.

In response, the McMillans and six other parents petitioned state education officials, who oversee individual school districts and boards, to intervene. In November, the state's education commissioner, Betty A. Rosa, ruled in their favor and ordered the district to retire the name and logo by July 2022 or face consequences that could include the withholding of state education funding and the removal of school board personnel.

Ms. Rosa said in her ruling that retaining the mascot inhibits “a safe and supportive environment” for students. She also took exception to the district’s use of Native stereotypes, from its “Lil’ Indians” elementary school newspaper and its illustration of the Native American boy in “Little Hiawatha,” to the practice of a teacher dressing in a Native American costume to rally Cambridge’s sports teams.

In a statement, school officials said the school board was “disappointed” with Ms. Rosa’s decision and that the board would “thoroughly and thoughtfully review the decision to best determine how to proceed.”

The school board is mulling the prospect of keeping the name and logo anyway, spurred on by the many residents who favor defending the nickname.

Some parents have cautioned the board against squandering even more education funding in a clearly uphill legal battle to retain the nickname. The district has already spent roughly \$80,000 addressing the issue, including mediation sessions between the two factions (they did not go well) and legal fees to contest the parents’ appeal.

All the efforts could be moot: The New York State Legislature is expected to vote on a bill this year banning Native American-themed names, logos and mascots in public schools beginning in fall 2024.

That hasn't stopped the fervor of people who want to keep the name.

To explore a challenge to the state order, some locals have been in discussions with the Native American Guardian's Association, a group that defended the Washington Redskins' name and takes on sports logo fights throughout the country.

Meetings of the once-obscure school board have been packed with vocal attendees, necessitating larger spaces and, at times, a local police officer assigned to ensure order.

One recent weeknight this month in a school cafeteria, board members sat on folding chairs emblazoned with the Indians mascot. Many of the roughly 75 attendees pointedly wore orange T-shirts and other garments adorned with the Indians logo.

Most of them were vigorously cheered as they spoke in support of keeping the mascot.

An official announced that it would cost over \$90,000 in supplies alone to physically change the nickname and logo on the gym floor, hallway signs, the sides of school buses and other places.

One speaker took the lectern and attributed the name opposition to "woke racism." Another stepped up and said she was sending her children to a school 20 minutes away because "I didn't want them to have this experience in their education."

Mr. Honyoust, wearing his Indians varsity jacket, stood and drew the distinction between what he saw as Cambridge's respectful use of the nickname and the disrespectful uses such as the cartoonlike Chief Wahoo logo once used by the Cleveland baseball team. (The logo was abandoned in 2019.)

Mr. Honyoust said his father, David Honyoust, led a movement to preserve the Cambridge mascot 20 years ago when a state order urged schools to retire them. Duane's son Dillon won election to the Cambridge school board last year with the promise to help retain the mascot.

"I'm an Indian and I know that Cambridge is respectful toward this imagery," he said, adding that the division in town is "hurting our kids, it's hurting our friendships."

But many tribes nationwide oppose the use of Native nicknames, including several tribes from the region that have issued statements denouncing the Cambridge mascot. The National Congress of American Indians keeps a mascot database that tallies 1,925 schools in 984 districts nationwide with Native American nicknames.

In New York, roughly 60 school districts, comprising over 110 schools, have Native American-themed nicknames like Warriors, Raiders, Braves and Tomahawks, according to a tally obtained by anti-mascot residents in Cambridge.

The mascot issue gained steam in late 2020 when John Kane, a Native American activist who graduated from Cambridge Central School in 1978, asked the board to consider changing it.

Mr. Kane saw using the mascot as “white people who like playing Indian.”

“It treats Native people like we are relics of the past and the students grow up thinking that’s what an Indian is,” he said in a phone interview.

By last June, the five-member board voted 3-2 to adopt a resolution to retire the nickname and logo. Then came the backlash, a vote to reverse the decision, the successful appeal to state officials, and now an outright culture war.

“It’s mostly outsiders, people who aren’t originally from here, who want to get rid of it,” said Belinda Sawyer, 49, a restaurant manager in town.

mostly outsiders, people who aren’t originally from here, who want to get rid of it,” said Belinda Sawyer, 49, who was a high school cheerleader. Credit...Cindy Schultz for The New York Times

A cheerleader when she attended high school in Cambridge, Ms. Sawyer dropped to the restaurant floor one recent evening and began reciting “Indians on the Warpath,” a cheer chanted over a percussive

drumming beat on the bleachers. (Her great-grandmother was a Blackfoot Indian, she said.)

Greg Woodcock, a Cambridge resident in support of keeping the name and mascot, estimated in a phone interview that some 85 percent of the district's residents are supportive.

They will raise the legal fees themselves, if necessary, he said.

Many critics have dismissed the anti-mascot campaign as being spearheaded by recent transplants to Cambridge, said Alex Dery Snider, a Cambridge resident who was a petitioner in the appeal.

“The message is that outsiders are not welcome here,” she said. “I know of people who planned to move here who changed their minds because of this issue. It just felt really unwelcoming to new people. The message has been if you aren't from here, you don't belong here.”

For Mr. McMillan, it was only after moving away to college and gaining more diverse friends that he began viewing certain things in a different light. He started seeing the name as an insensitive caricature that perpetuated stereotypes of Native Americans. As a teen, he did the tomahawk chop to cheer on the high school's football team.

Since joining the fight to remove the name, he has had a palpable drop in business for his local house painting business and chilly reception from some longtime friends, he said.

While the Cambridge “Indians” would likely one day be a thing of the past, he said, healing the division in town would take much longer.

“I think it will take a generation to pass,” he said, “for some people to let this go.”

© 2022 The New York Times Company.

The content you have chosen to save (which may include videos, articles, images and other copyrighted materials) is intended for your personal, noncommercial use. Such content is owned or controlled by The New York Times Company or the party credited as the content provider. Please refer to [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com/terms-of-service) and the Terms of Service available on its website for information and restrictions related to the content.

Printed with  from Pocket