



NEW YORK STATE LEGISLATURE

January 27, 2025

Commissioner Betty A. Rosa
New York State Education Department
89 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12234

Dear Commissioner Rosa:

We write to urge SED to reconsider its determination that certain school districts must abandon their athletic team names if the name was previously associated with Indigenous imagery. While we fully recognize the importance of eliminating direct references to, and images of, Native American culture in order to ensure safe and respectful student experiences, we maintain that SED's posture does not consider the following:

1. **That certain team names, before being tied to Indigenous imagery, conjure numerous other, unrelated associations.** For example, the name "Warrior" on its own sooner suggests a soldier, gladiator, or fighter of any kind than it does a reference to Indigenous people or culture. In team athletic settings, nurturing a sense of battle is often vital for helping young athletes stay focused and build trust among their teammates, and the idea that long-held warrior team names must be eliminated in order for these school districts to retain state funding is patently ridiculous.
2. **That adoption of new team names will have real costs for our districts, especially those that have previously undergone removal of Indigenous imagery.** In the case of the Port Jervis City School District, which long held the team name the Port Jervis "Red Raiders," school officials made the determination years ago to strip Indigenous imagery from its athletics program, as well as the word "Red," a clearly inappropriate nod to the area's Native American heritage. Port Jervis did the right thing long before it was mandated by SED, spending tens of thousands of dollars in the process, and are now being penalized for not going far enough. Here again, "Raider" on its own sooner conjures images of pirates or vikings. Consider the additional dollars Port Jervis will be expected to spend, once again, to re-implement its athletics branding on new uniforms, merchandise, and gymnasium/field installations.
3. **That some districts not impacted by this rule-making will retain team names that have similarly negative connotations.** For example, another district in Orange County retains the team name "Bushmen," which refers to an Indigenous group in Africa. Across the county, yet another district retains the team name "Crusaders," which some may read either as a reference to the brutal religious wars initiated by the Christian Church—or as a reference to passionate people who campaign for a cause.

Secondarily, though equally worthy of consideration, is the local pride instilled by long-held district team names. We have heard from numerous constituents and school leaders who understand and appreciate SED's approach to facilitating respectful educational spaces for all learners, but who — as we do — feel the state's continued 'crusade' for changing unaffiliated team names is a bridge too far.

We respectfully request you reverse course on this mandate, and allow schools to retain their team names if they have removed all visual references to Indigenous people and culture. We look forward to engaging on this issue further with you.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of James Skoufis in black ink.

James Skoufis
State Senator, 42nd District

Handwritten signature of Karl Brabenec in black ink.

Karl Brabenec
Assemblymember, 98th District