**The Aftermath of Redskins Indian Mascot Decisions: What’s Next? [[1]](#footnote-1)**

By

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***Abstract***: *For decades Indian mascot names have been generally regarded as stereotypical and racist.* *Because of the divisive nature of Native American mascots, school systems from middle school through college level have in the past and are now coming to terms with changing these names. The “Redkskin” mascot name is particularly offensive. A number of high schools have dropped the Redskin mascot name, but the decisions, procedures, judgments, and residual effects of change within these school systems and communities differ. What happens after a mascot change and how this impacts communities who for many decades used these names in their school systems is an area that can be as critical as the decision to change itself.*

**Introduction**

Recent nation-wide media attention connected with the NFL franchise Washington (DC) Redskin football team’s mascot reveals an ongoing debate, decades long, about the inappropriate use of Native American names, symbols, and images. Racist mascot names are one thing in the world of professional athletics, but it is another ball game to witness the presence of this dynamic in our school systems. Professional athletics is a business where participants are basically commodities. Students who participate in school-sponsored athletics are usually closely connected to education and educational values whose actions, symbols, and imagery are representative of their school and community. Addressing this conflict, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) put a ban on nicknames or logos that are considered “hostile” or “abusive” and threatened sanctions on schools which do not comply (CBS/AP). Individual states—notably Wisconsin, Maine, and Oregon—have also put bans on Native American mascot names in their school systems.

There is little doubt that the use of Native American mascots is now deemed offensive by most Native Americans and many non-Natives. The Redskin mascot name is particularly divisive. Maine Indian Tribal State Commission (MITSC) member Cushman Anthony, while discussing the ‘Redskin’ mascot name, stated that the early British government placed a bounty on Indian scalps. When the scalps were turned in for money, they were bloody and referred to as “redskins.” Bill Plaschke of the LA times quoted Susan Harjo, who was “the lead plantiff in one of the most compelling lawsuits in history.” She said, "It is the worst thing in the English language you can be called if you are a native person" (Plaschke, 2009). Senator McCain said if he owned the team (Washington Redskins), he would “probably change” the name (Smith, 2014). And finally Leonard Pitts, Jr. of the Miami Herald wrote in reference to the use of the “Redskin” name, “I say one cannot arbitrarily decide that a word—especially an old and bloodstained word—suddenly means something other than what it always has. … And I say that if I call you an “idiot,” but say that “idiot” now means “genius,” you will be no less insulted (Pitts, 2013).

The trend has been to change the mascot names in our school systems. The number of schools using Native American names and imagery has gone down from about 3000 to 900 since 1971: some of those counted are professional teams, but most are schools (Lukas, 2013). The processes of change differ from school to school and state to state. The impact on schools and communities who experience this change can either become a negative sticking point or an opportunity for constructive growth. The process of making a decision and the steps taken in the period immediately following the decision when implementation begins offer important lessons on the process of constructive change. In this case study, we look at how four schools navigated this sometimes difficult territory.

**Mascot** **Origins**

The origin of most mascot names varies greatly, but generally the mascot is supposed to connect with the community, school, or organization it represents by fostering pride in support of activities connected mainly with athletic teams. Some names meaningfully connect with such things as industry (Steelers), history (Forty-niners), or agriculture (Aggies), but most names are meant to project ferocity, boldness, or bravery (Vikings, Pirates, Braves), intending to strike fear into the hearts of opponents on the athletic fields or courts. Some names are by connotation not aggressive or formidable by nature, so their monikers are adjusted to better suggest ferocity such as the “Fighting Saints.” Most of these mascots connect with the community or organization they hale from.

When considering the “Redskin” mascot name, the symbols and imagery used to accompany this name are usually based upon misinterpretations of Native American (NA) culture and history. Head dresses, loin cloths, imitated war whoops, drum beats, chanting, and tomahawk chops by fans in the stands at athletic events (mostly by non-NA) do not really connect with the communities or school systems they represent (Palmer, 2012). If the rationale to retain NA mascot names such as “Redskins” is supported by arguments of honor, respect, and pride, the imagery and actions that are used by these schools actually has the opposite effect on Native Americans, who witness elements of their culture and history being misused in this way. Josh Reid, an assistant professor of History and the head of the Indigenous Studies program at University of Massachusetts, said that the Redskins name needs to change: “Why is there a sports team still called the Redskins? Here it is, this terrible racial slur being used as the name of the team. How would other people feel if it was called something else? Fill in whatever racial slur you want there” (as cited in Mael, 2013). These institutions and communities clinging to the Redskin name, protest that the use of the name is with intended honor and respect— a response, a reason, and some say an excuse for using the name. In many cases the failure to recognize the harmful effects, sometimes even by NA themselves, may be a lack of education specific to NA culture and history. Theodore Van Alst, the director of the Native American Cultural Center at Yale who has researched and written about Native Americans in film asserts:

This unreconciled history dehumanizes an entire people and hollows out a space in the public consciousness that is then filled with stereotype … The culture creates a character like Tonto, or a mascot like the Redskins, … Exposure to such mascots has a harmful impact on American Indian students’ feelings of personal and community worth, according to a 2008 study titled “Of Warrior Chiefs and Indian Princesses” and published in Basic and Applied Social Psychology. (cited in Zak)

Lewis and Clark College assistant psychology professor Andrae Brown said, “Indian mascots violate the civil rights of Native American Students by failing to provide school environments where they can learn and thrive” (Palmer, 2012). A study conducted by the American Psychological Association reported that NA students who are exposed to the sight of these misrepresentations of their culture suffer from lack of self-esteem and self-efficacy and are greatly hindered with their overall education (apa.org, 2005). Many wonder why a nation that professes to support equality and diversity allows racist mascots to exist in our educational institutions. The negative pall cast by the inappropriate use of these mascots may be perceived as having a silver lining in that these negative events can present teachable moments where all involved can achieve a better understanding of self, history, and culture through education. Change, transition, and adjustment, however, have proven to be challenging and, in most all cases, uncomfortable at some level.

**Changing** **Mascots**

In many instances where change has taken place on the high school level, the issue has been ongoing for years. It surfaces and re-surfaces in complaints from students, the community, or some influence outside the community such as State School Board decrees or resolutions. Often once a complaint reaches a level of concern for the school district, school administrations put it to the student body for a vote. Some schools have the school board make a decision with minimal community input, and others appoint committees to research the issue and report to school administrations with suggestions.

Cooperstown Central High School in the State of New York, for example, voted to change the Redskin mascot name prompted by requests from the student body (ICTMNStaff, 2013). The State of Maine mandated that all schools using the Redskin mascot name needed to change. Sanford High School in Maine resisted and was the last high school in the state to sport the Redskin mascot.

A third example, Port Townsend High School in the State of Washington, retired the Redskin mascot name in 2013[[3]](#footnote-3). The ultimate change was prompted by a letter to the school board from a local resident (Bermant, 2012)**.** Three different schools voted for change initiated by three different sources.

The process of change in each of these schools also differed. The Cooperstown situation involved action initiated by the students recognizing the need for change, taking a vote, and going to the administration with their request. The Board of Education discussed the request and voted for change (oneidaindiannation.com, 2013)**.**

Sanford held off from the state mandate but finally capitulated after a tribal commission met with residents who then went to school administration asking for change. The process that recommended change was a school committee meeting with discussion and a vote (Sanford votes to drop 'Redskins' as high school nickname, 2012).

The Port Townsend School Board responded to a letter from a community member by establishing a citizens committee to study and report back after a yearlong process of gathering information. The committee was specifically asked not to make a retirement recommendation, but, rather, to issue findings. Students’ role in the initial Port Townsend process was minimal. This was a dramatic change from the way this issue had been dealt with before. The mascot issue had previously surfaced in 2000 and also in the 90’s. In the intervening years, the State of Washington issued strong recommendations to retire offensive mascots with little input or effect. In Port Townsend, the students were asked to vote on both occasions, and they favored retaining the mascot (Bermant, 2012).

The Cooperstown and Sanford processes were relatively short and direct, whereas the Port Townsend process was longer and more methodical in 2013. The differing processes typify the many and varied ways that changing a mascot transpires in educational institutions.

**Stages of Transition**

There are very few instances, if any, where efforts to change mascots have not met with some resistance. Usually after the process of change begins, a progression of movements generally takes place. The usual stages involve the following:

1) A decision to discuss the issue and consider changing the mascot: This process varies widely in terms of the way it is structured, who is involved, and the time it takes to make a decision. Once a decision is made, the next steps are usually spelled out, including how a new mascot will be chosen.

2) The exploration of new mascots and the vote—usually by students—for a new mascot name: The community may also be involved to some degree, but allowing the student body to select a new name gives them the opportunity to genuinely connect with a new identity helping to modify the negative feelings that may exist after the loss of a changed mascot name. This stage also presents opportunities for education involving research into the roots of the community in efforts to locate a mascot that connects.

3) Discussions on retirement and replacement costs of paraphernalia and uniforms connected with the old mascot: for most schools who decide on change, this is a big budget item. When to retire a mascot and how to make the transition are challenging issues that require thoughtful planning and budget considerations. Besides uniform replacement, re-painting of floors and structures on school grounds as well as reconfiguring or replacing statues, facial edifices, ornaments, posters, signs, and athletic equipment are major costs to school districts. In some instances, NA tribes have helped school districts with these costs.

4) Opportunities and efforts to educate school and community about Native American history and culture: This stage involves educational opportunities ranging from instructor directed class discussions, community discussions, virtual and social media discussions and the actual full range adoption of a NA curriculum by the school district.

5) Ultimate adjustment by school and community: just how this stage evolves may depend greatly or, at least in some degree, on the processes involved in making the change. Allowing and inviting community input and involving alumni in the process seems to have produced less harmful after affects that sometimes linger in the school and community after a mascot name change.

Port Townsend Superintendent Engle was a principal in a previous school district in North Seattle, where he administered a change dropping the mascot name *Chiefs* at Meadowdale High School in the 1990’s. He witnessed aftermath effects on students that were harmful and abusive. He was aware that the student body at Port Townsend (PT) had voted twice in the past to keep the mascot. Undoubtedly, these factors were a motivating influence in keeping student input minimal in the information gathering and initial decision making stages.

A plan was outlined by the school board to allow a gradual changeover accommodating budget concerns(Claflin, School Board won't reconsider Redskins decision, 2013)**.** Photos, signs, emblems and any other objects that projected Redskin images or symbols in PT needed to be replaced. The process of change in PT to drop the Redskin mascot became a collaborative effort spearheaded by Superintendent David Engle. He said, “We wanted to keep the change kid-centered, and our focus was on how to help kids.”

He immediately met with school administration and coaches, stressing the importance of a positive teamwork approach during the transition period. The welfare of the students and the importance of student input in choosing a new name were stressed to all. Ultimately it was a mixed and supportive effort of administration, coaches, athletes, and student body that came together to work through the wrinkles of change and the ultimate choice of the new mascot, “Redhawks” (Engle, 2014).

Nearly a year after the decision to retire the Redskin mascot, Port Townsend students chose the Redhawks as the mascot name that would represent them from then on. To arrive at this decision, athletic director Scott Wilson had organized over 15 student meetings with as many as 30 students in attendance to get ideas and feedback for the new mascot name (Claflin, School Board won't reconsider Redskins decision, 2013).

The choice of a new mascot was a “student brokering process working with the Alumni,” Engle said. The idea for the new mascot name though was fostered independently by both groups – students and alumni – before actual collaboration began. The ultimate choice was left to students and only ten students out of the entire student body did not take place in the balloting (Engle, 2014).

Immediate after-effects in PT were evidenced by letter writing campaigns, meetings, and appeals to school administration to reinstate the Redskin mascot. Members of the School Board itself who were up for re-election were also threatened. The school board stood firm on its decision. In light of how well the community has now adjusted, these after-effects may be perceived as knee-jerk reactions of a minority of disgruntled supporters who genuinely mourned the passing of a symbol that represented fond traditions in their minds and in their experience. The overwhelming research presented by the committee left little doubt in most minds that the mascot was harmful and change needed to take place (Claflin, PTHS Redskins are out, 2013). After two years following the decision, the PT community is still adjusting but in a more positive manner compared to what other schools experienced.

When asked in retrospect what things were done right with the process of change, Engle stated that taking a longer, more evaluative approach on a two year time continuum was valuable and productive. Speaking from his past experience as a principal at Meadowdale High School in North Seattle, the abrupt name change by the school district was not received well and was looked upon by the community as an administrative command decision with little or no input. He said there was more community acceptance in PT: “No one feels as though they didn’t have a chance to speak” on the issue. Other positives were the support exhibited by the local tribes as over $ 30,000 has been pledged to help with transition costs (Engle, 2014).

One of the more positive things to come out of the PT mascot change was the school board’s decision to adopt the *Since Time Immemorial Curriculum* on the Washington State OSPI (Office of the Superintendent of Instruction) website (www.indian-ed.org), which educates students on the history and culture of indigenous peoples. [[4]](#footnote-4) Engle said that the adoption of the Native American curriculum was “huge.” He viewed this change in the social studies curriculum as “most important and long lasting.” Engle said, “We are lucky and thankful for this curriculum model and having access to this valuable resource” (Engle, 2014).

What would Supt. Engle do differently? “If I had it to do over again, I’d have more public forums – early and often.” He also mentioned making better use of the communicative technology such as Twitter to help with gathering information and providing another forum for comment (Engle, 2014). This may have helped with relieving some of the pent up angst and overall negative energy that was present at the Board meeting when the public knew the School Board was going to vote on whether or not to keep the Redskin mascot. During this meeting there were verbal threats of removal from the Board leveled at one board member in particular whose position was up for re-election. This person was re-elected by a 3 to 1 margin, suggesting that although loud, the crowd present at this meeting was not representative of the majority thought on the mascot topic in the PT community (Engle, 2014).

In contrast, Wiscasset High School’s transition in the State of Maine was a tumultuous one in 2011. Responses to the change within the Maine school system and community was dramatically different than at Port Townsend HS. Retirement of the Redskin mascot of 62 years was not accepted in a positive way. Input was collected from students and community concerning the choice of a new mascot, and the Wolverine was chosen. Following this decision, half of the student body staged a walkout, protesting the change, and six months later the boys basketball team showed up to a game wearing t-shirts with the old Redskin logo on them supported by a cheering crowd (Tibbitts, 2011). The debate is maintaining a steady tempo in the community (Soong, 2013). The high school administration is attempting to remove the Wiscasset school system from the school district that required the name change. If the school does move into another district (because of curricular and other concerns - they say), there is a chance that the Redskin mascot name would return (Soong, 2013).

While older members of communities who have cherished the traditions connected with the Redskin mascot are much harder to reach, as is evidenced in most all processes of change,the students at Cooperstown Central initiated the movement for change and have embraced it. The school district at Cooperstown provides a character education program that is credited with providing students with tools needed to address such divisive issues as racist mascots. Ray Halbritter, Oneida Nation Representative and CEO, said this to the Cooperstown students: “You have announced a standard that recognizes that mascots which are known to dehumanize and disrespect any race of mankind have no place in our school, or our country.” Moved by the students’ resolve, the Oneida Nation pledged money for new school uniforms, a significant cost factor in adopting a new mascot (oneidaindiannation.com, 2013).

**Aftermath Observations and Ongoing Questions**

While Native activists and prominent voices representing Native Americans nationwide—including the National Congress of American Indians—speak out for the outright removal of racist mascot names in all of our educational institutions, there are NA high schools that use the Redskin mascot and use it proudly (Soong, 2013). Red Mesa High School is located on the Navajo Reservation where over 90% of the student body is NA. According to Navajo Superintendent Tommie Yazzie, “Being from Native American culture, (the term) is not derogatory,” he said. Although he said that it is acceptable for NA schools to use the Redskin mascot name, non-Native American populations should not use it (Soong, 2013). A similar argument emerged from several tribes in Oregon after a statewide ban on Indian mascots.

Whether or not all Native Americans share the same point of view, Yazzie’s stance addresses an issue that concerns Native Americans and their identity, and that is having the freedom to define who they are and not have another culture do so by borrowing names and symbols from their culture and misinterpreting them (King, 2006).

At any rate, education for all involved seems to be a good method of approaching this divisive issue as illustrated by the student body at Cooperstown Central School where the Superintendent C.J. Hebert said,

We are very pleased that our students are able to critically examine issues of social consequence and feel comfortable expressing their opinions, even in the face of potential resistance. The Cooperstown Central School District has devoted significant effort and resource toward its character education program, and the results are unmistakable. Students, staff, alumni and community members are also to be commended for their active participation in this move toward a more culturally acceptable nickname. (oneidaindiannation.com).

Similarly in Port Townsend it was important that the mascot decision was accompanied by aschool resolutionthat the school review the curriculum**.**

Critical broader issues are at stake in this debate about the connection between athletics and education. Should school districts expect educational values to be stressed in their athletic programs? Should these athletic programs support the values and goals of the educational institutions they represent? Which goals and values and how are these implemented? One might ask if racism is not allowed in the classroom, why is it tolerated on the athletic playing fields? A general theme that educators and community members provided during fact gathering sessions in Port Townsend was the goal to promote an education for their students that prepares them to be more than just good local citizens. Their wish was to foster values to prepare their students to be citizens of the world. How do our institutions ensure that all aspects of their programs promote critical values?

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2. Gary Arthur is a professor at Grays Harbor College. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Arthur,” Is Diversity a Mask or a Bridge” for a description of the initial process of changing a mascot at Port Townsend High School. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Several cases in the Enduring Legacies collection discuss the development of the tribal sovereignty curriculum, Smith, Brown and Costantino, “Since Time Immemorial,” in Washington. See Hurtado and Costantino, “Whose History Should we Teach?” and Smith and Hurtado, “Waiting Patiently-500 Years.“ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)