

Public Use of Native American Names, Symbols & Mascots

An overview of the decision and rationale leading to the guiding principles and process for selecting a name for West Irondequoit athletic teams



West Irondequoit Central School District

www.westirondequoit.org

Guiding Principles

The name/mascot/emblem shall:

- Appropriately reflect: good sportsmanship, school spirit, respect, pride and a desire to excel.
- Be a positive representation of the school district, its students and staff, the community and its residents and thereby, free of violence, slang or offensive innuendo.
- Be consistent with the District's Nondiscrimination in employment, educational programs and student activities policy (#3170) and thereby, free of reference to: race, creed, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, political affiliation or beliefs, veteran or marital status.

Name Selection Committee

- (2) Varsity Club student representatives
- (1) Varsity Coach
- (3) At-large Student representatives
- (1) IHS Principal
- (1) Student Council Advisor
- (4) Student Council Officers
- (1) WISCD Director of Athletics
- (1) Representative of WI Alumni Association
- (1) Representative of PTA
- (2) At-large Community Members
- (1) Director of Public Information
(Ex-officio, non-voting)

Decision & Rationale

Following the receipt of the memo (4/5/01) from New York State Department of Education Commissioner Richard P. Mills regarding public use of Native American names, symbols and mascots, the West Irondequoit Central School District Administration and Board of Education undertook a course of action in accordance with the Commissioner's directive to "lead communities to a new understanding of this matter . . . and to end the use of Native American mascots as soon as practical."

Upon extensive research, discussion and reflection, thoughtful community input and by listening and learning, the Board re-evaluated the District's traditions and intentions and, in light of new understanding, advocates making the necessary sacrifices for the greater good. On August 23, 2001, the West Irondequoit Board of Education unanimously voted to respectfully retire the name "Indians" for district athletic teams as well as all associated images and uses associated with the name, beginning (for practical reasons) in the 2002-03 school year.

- **The name "Indians" and all associated images and uses, is and has traditionally been, a source of pride for West Irondequoit students, staff, community and alumni.** Use of the name has been respectful and held in the highest regard by our competitors, our community, and former and current students as a symbol consistent with our historic, geographic and cultural heritage.
- **While the District's intentions were good and honorable,** the Board now knows that perceptions by some Native Americans of the name, images, related actions, and the stereotypes of Native Americans which they represent, have been hurtful and demeaning.
- **While attempts were made to portray Native Americans accurately in the usage of images, the Board has learned that each of those portrayals was in some way inaccurate or inappropriate** and now seeks to eliminate those offenses and deficiencies by retiring the name and those images from further use. The Board believes this decision affirms human dignity and respect for all people and groups different from ourselves.
- **The Board believes that as an educational institution, we have the responsibility to consistently model those universal values which we profess to be essential** to create a safe and welcoming environment for each child and adult in our school district and in a global society. Among those values and within the Code of Conduct and mission of our school district are: pride in work, a sense of self-worth, physical well-being, integrity, decency, respect and care for others, valuing of differences and skill in interpersonal relations. The Board believes the action of retiring the Indian name and images is in keeping with

those values and promotes the creation of a culture of decency and respect.

- **The Board believes that school spirit and competitive pride are borne, not out of a name, but out of individual and team skills.** With pride and confidence, the Board charges the current IHS student body, faculty and staff, IHS alumni and the community to use the established Guiding Principles to choose a new name for our athletic teams that will reflect a "new understanding" and appropriately represent the pride and spirit that lives in the hearts of West Irondequoit students today and always.

The Board further recognized:

- the Commissioner's memo was issued a day before the U.S. Civil Rights Commission voted 5-2 calling for an end to Indian team names.
- in August 2000, NYS Attorney General Eliot Spitzer reviewed this issue and raised serious concerns that certain uses of Native American names and symbols could violate the Federal Civil Rights Act of 1964.
- legal counsel advised the District that failure to comply with the Commissioner's request could ultimately result in costly litigation that would be unlikely to withstand a challenge.

Name Selection Process

1. Suggestions for names accepted from students, staff, alumni & community.* (See attached form)
2. Using the Guiding Principles, Student Council reviews all suggestions and passes up to 25 acceptable choices to the Name Selection Committee.
3. Using the Guiding Principles, the Name Selection Committee reduces the choices to up to five names for a public vote.
4. Students (K-12) & interested staff, alumni and community residents vote on their choice for a name on November 14-15.
5. Winning name is announced to students, staff, alumni & community via website, ICAT 12, newsletters and media.

* *Additional Suggestion Forms, available in all schools, District Office and on the website, may be mailed to IHS Student Council, 260 Cooper Rd. Rochester, NY 14617 by 10/12.*