Proposal for the Removal of Native American Mascots from the Madison Metropolitan School District

The Problem of Mascots within

1.1 Background of Native American mascots

A mascot, the figurehead of a sports team is "a person, animal, or object adopted by a group as a symbolic figure." Looking at Mascots and logos commonly in use, we see that they are most often meant to be an intimidating (such as the Panthers, Lions, etc.) or entertaining symbol. Mascots will give half-time entertainment and dance. More often than not, the mascot is an animal, or some sub-human symbol. In the NFL, for instance, 20/27 (~75%) of mascots are animals. One example of an offensive mascot would be the Washington Redskins. Redskins is a dictionary defined racial slur; an insinuation or allegation about someone that is likely to insult them or damage their reputation. In addition, the representation of Native Americans as a man with deep, red skin, a braid, and a feather in the hair is extremely offensive, as it reduces the 562 federally recognized tribes (among many more) to an inaccurate (to say the least) and offensive caricature. However, offensive caricatures aside, the very act of representing a group of people who have vehemently asked for themselves to not be represented as a sports symbol is disrespectful. Unfortunately, the Washington Redskins logo is not unique-- far from it, in fact. In Wisconsin alone, 18 High School teams still have adopted such names and mascots as the Chieftains, the Chiefs, the Braves, the Indians, the Blackhawks, the Apaches, among others. Mukwonago High School travels with their mascot, "the Indians," very often to Madison schools. In addition, merchandise and apparel from such teams as the Redskins, Blackhawks, and the Cleveland Indians are permissible inside schools. The history of resistance to such terms is also very complex and long. One notable figure in the fight against racist mascots is Barbara Munson, a member of the Oneida Nation, who is also the leader of the Wisconsin Indian Education Association’s Indian Mascot and Logo Task Force.

1.2 Impacts of Native American mascots

In 2005, the American Psychological Association called for the retirement of “all American Indian mascots, symbols, images and personalities by schools, colleges, universities, athletic teams and organizations, [on the grounds that they, a., undermine] the ability of American Indian Nations to portray accurate and respectful images of their culture, spirituality, and traditions, [b., they present] stereotypical images of American Indians. Such mascots are a contemporary example of prejudice by the dominant culture against racial and ethnic minority groups. [Finally, they are] a form of discrimination against American Indian Nations.”¹ The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission defines harassment as including “racial slurs, offensive or derogatory remarks about a person's race...or the display of racially offensive symbols.”² It is clear that the symbols are offensive to people (if it doesn't offend the average student, the public outcry which has resulted in hundreds of schools changing mascots speaks for itself). In addition, it can clearly be derived that students are offended, insulted, and by the EEOC definition, “harassed” by these logos and mascots. Dr. Michael Friedman conducted research into the effects of Native American mascots (specifically the Washington Redskins): “experimental laboratory studies demonstrate the causal effect and specific mechanisms by which Native American mascots influence Native American
well-being. Tests have shown that the presence of Native American mascots results directly in lower self-esteem and lower mood among both Native American adolescents and young adults, as well as increased negative attitudes towards Native Americans among non-Native Americans. Importantly, these effects occur regardless of whether the Native American mascot is considered ‘offensive.’ [...] Experimental studies demonstrate that the Washington organization is contributing to prejudice and discrimination that harms Native Americans in two ways. First, simply by aggressively marketing a stereotypical and outdated caricature of Native Americans, the organization is creating a ‘threat in the air’ that risks offending and harming the self-concept of Native Americans (Ahmed, Mohammed & Williams, 2007; Steele, 1997). Second, these stereotypical images are being marketed to non-Native Americans, which threaten to perpetuate stereotypes of and negative attitudes towards Native Americans (Banks, 1993). The combination of these two factors increases the risk of creating ‘racially hostile environments’ for Native Americans (American Psychological Association, 2005).” Friedman concludes, stating that “images of Native Americans mascots, even those that are deemed by Native Americans as neutral or positive, result in harmful psychological effects. Not only do mascots have a direct effect on Native American self-esteem, mood, community confidence and sense of achievement, but they also perpetuate negative associations of and attitudes towards Native Americans among non-Native American groups.” In addition, “across multiple studies, prejudice and discrimination including the use of racial slurs such as the [redskin] of the Washington mascot are associated with higher levels of depression, substance abuse, suicidality, increased pain and maladaptive health behaviors among Native American adults, adolescents and children.” As a cumulative meta-analysis of the effects of these logos and mascots, it is clear that there exist drastic effects on the Native American communities, as well as those that result from attritional existence of these mascots.

Proposed Solution within the Madison Metropolitan School District to the impacts and existence of Native American mascots

2.1 Dress Code
We propose for the emotional and physical well-being of our students both Native and non-Native Americans, an extension of MMSD Behavior Education Plan, code of conduct, and any related and subsequent MMSD doctrine relating to the student dress code, which prevents any clothing, jewelry, or any related medium for symbolic expression which depicts a Native American re-appropriated as a mascot, logo, or caricature. These include, but are not limited to, those of the Chicago Blackhawks, Washington Redskins, Cleveland Indians, and Atlanta Braves. Wearing the aforementioned items would result in the same measures that any other dress code violation would be handled: for instance, the student may be asked to turn their shirt inside out so that the logo is not visible, remove any jewelry deemed violative of the proposed amendment, or be provided with a substitutive article of clothing. The student would receive no disciplinary measures, as is district policy in regards to dress code policy.

2.2 Travelling Mascots
Due to the aforementioned impacts of these harmful logos, we propose that, any team that has a mascot relating to Native Americans be forbidden from bringing their mascots to games against any Madison Metropolitan team. Should the District with the mascot in question refuse to comply with the proposed amendments, the game should be cancelled.
3.1 Conclusion

It should be the goal of every school district to promote equality and cultural respect in education, as well as among students. These mascots and logos are in direct violation of these values. For the well-being, equity, and emotional safety of our students, both Native and non-Native Americans, we propose the aforementioned amendments and, in correspondence with the upheld value of equity and equality, we expect to see these proposed amendments passed and enforced by and in all High Schools, Middle Schools, and Elementary Schools within the Madison Metropolitan School District.

