

# CEASING USAGE OF AMERICAN INDIAN MASCOTS

## FACTORS IN THE RETIREMENT OR RETAINMENT OF AMERICAN INDIAN FOLKS AS MASCOTS WITHIN FOUR WISCONSIN K-12 SCHOOLS

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### ABSTRACT

The use of Indigenous Peoples as team names and mascots within K-12 school districts in the United States has been contested by both individuals and organizations for decades. Recent studies have concluded that exposure to Indigenous caricatures in learning environments has adverse effects on the well-being of American Indian students and boosts the self-esteem of non-Indigenous students (O'Keefe et. al 2019). School districts that continue to use Indigenous team names and mascots often cite tradition as defense against change, but hundreds of school districts throughout the country have maintained community pride and transition to another team name and mascot. This research, conducted over the Summer of 2019, focuses on identifying the best approaches for producing these transformative spaces while maintaining ties to community members' place identity, and communicating these findings to our school boards and district administration of the process.

### POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

The land that I now live and work on, what is now known as Eau Claire, WI is the traditional homeland of the Ojibwe and Dakota Nations. However, I was born and raised in the traditional homelands of the Ho-Chunk Nation. I do not identify as American Indian. I do identify as a rural Wisconsinite and an alumni of a rural school district. Throughout this poster, I will use the terms American Indian and Native American interchangeably, while recognizing that the individual and sovereign Nations of United States can by no means be essentialized to one single story and Pan-Indian identity. I will also use the term "mascot" to encompass usage of American Indian folks as nickname, logo, caricature, and namesake.

### INTRODUCTION

American Indians have been used as high school mascots in Wisconsin since the 1910s, and the struggle to eliminate them has existed since the 1970s. In the late 1990s, 33 of the 64 high schools using race-based mascots have retired them. Concentrations of schools continuing to use them exist in west-central, southwestern, southeastern, and east-central parts of the state (Figure 1). Rice Lake High School was the first to retire its American Indian-

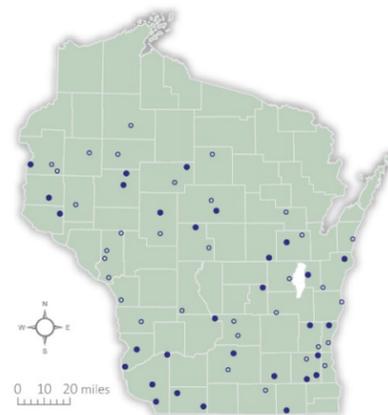


Figure 1. High schools using American Indian mascots, past and present.

themed mascot imagery in 1989, and between 1992-1999, the state witnessed its first of two distinct waves of retirements. The second wave occurred between 2006-2011 (Figure 2). Each of these periods coincided with nationwide movements to eradicate race-based team names (Bullock 2019).

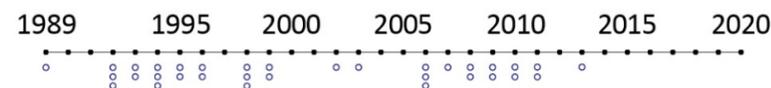


Figure 2. Timeline of retirement of American Indian mascots in Wisconsin high schools, 1989-2020

Act 250, signed into law in 2010 by Governor Doyle, was intended to accelerate the eradication of race-based team names and mascots, but it was weakened by Governor Walker in 2013 (VanEgeren 2013). School boards have grappled with this issue since, but with little documented guidance on how to plan and manage a mascot change, few have been successful. This project aims to provide school boards with a "best practice" approach to retiring a race-based mascot by examining the approaches taken by four west-central Wisconsin school districts.

### METHODS

Wisconsin K-12 districts of Osseo-Fairchild, Menomonie, Galesville-Etrick-Trempealeau, and Tomah were selected for study due to their varied current status & paths to retirement or retainment. Research conducted centered the synthesizing and critical analysis of each district's timeline of controversy. Local newspapers were consulted through the open access and free source <https://badgerlink.newsmemory.com/wna/badgerlink/>

The terms "American Indian", "Mascot", "Mascot Controversy", "Mascot Issue", and "Logo" were utilized as search terms. Four timelines synthesized the article content, date of occurrence, and source were constructed through spreadsheets. Articles containing any one of the five search terms, following 2/25/2010, when the Wisconsin State Assembly passed proposal (51-42) in support of AB 35, which allowed school district residents to file complaints regarding use of discriminatory mascots. Consulted papers in these communities include the *Tri-county News*, *The Dunn County News*, *The Galesville Republican*, *The Trempealeau County Times*, *The La Crosse Tribune*, *The Tomah Journal*, and *the Tomah Monitor-Herald*.



Figure 3. Tri-County News article from September 23, 2010 outlining district decision via referendum.



Figure 4. Tri-County News article from July 1, 2011 outlining "Logo Committee Members Still Needed"

### FINDINGS

- Alumni hold the most stakeholder salience in decisions to retain or retire these mascots, over district administration, elected school board members, current students of the district, and members of Tribal Nations.
- High levels of community apathy positively correlates with ease of retirement.
- Higher rates of success in retirement coincide with school boards and administration refusing to conduct discussions regarding *whether* the change would be made, instead conducting conversation over *what* the retirement process and subsequent selection of a new mascot would look like.

### SUMMARY

This research was primarily based in the consultation of local media. Through an extensive literature review and four distinct case studies of the chronological retirement or retainment of American Indian folks as mascots within K-12 districts of Wisconsin, it was concluded that there are three intersecting strategies to successful retirement. These strategies include; refusal to entertain discussion over *whether* the retirement will occur, community involvement in the new logo selection process, and recognition of alumni perspectives while centering value for additional stakeholders.

In future studies it would be beneficial to conduct culturally competent and respectful interviews and listening sessions with members of these communities, holding varied perspectives, informed through the application of Indigenous theories and methodologies.

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