

Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation



Education Committee Public Hearing March 17, 2021

Testimony of Crystal Whipple, Tribal Council Member Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation

Concerning H.B. 6619 The Development of a Kindergarten to Eight Grade Model Curriculum

Senators McCrory, Berthel, and Abrams and Representatives Sanchez, McCarty and Barry, and all of the honorable members of the Education Committee, my name is Crystal Whipple and I am honored to appear before you on behalf of the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation as one of our Tribe's Council Members and as the Chairwoman of our Tribal Education Committee.

I'm here today to discuss H.B. 6619. I want to convey our appreciation to the Committee for including Native American studies as part of this very important bill. However, we also respectfully request that the Committee take a stronger stance by including language to institute a mandatory comprehensive Native American studies curriculum for Connecticut's public schools. We applaud the legislature's efforts in 2019 to pass Public Act 19-12 concerning the inclusion of African-American and Black studies and Puerto Rican and Latino studies into the public school curriculum. Similar action is needed to ensure that Connecticut's education system improves the quality of and access to Native American studies in its curriculum.

In 2019, the National Congress of American Indians issued a report that highlighted the need for initiatives like H.B. 6619. The report, attached, summarized the efforts of all fifty states to implement educational content about Indigenous people into K-12 classrooms and found that 87% of state history and social studies curriculums included no mention of tribal history after 1900. In fact, 27 states had no mention of Native people whatsoever in their K-12 curriculum.

In Connecticut, we are surrounded by Algonquin Indian references — the very word "Connecticut" being among the most prominent (meaning: "Long Tidal River" in Algonquin). Yet, very few of Connecticut's residents – adults and youth, alike – know from where those names originate, let alone the histories, contributions and partnerships of Tribal Nations.

Like you, we see education as the key component to bridging understanding and building a unified community, and that's what we hope will be achieved with passage of legislation that improves the quality of and access to Native American studies curriculum.

Without the existence of a mandatory comprehensive Native studies curriculum,

inappropriate references, inaccuracies and false assumptions about Indigenous people go largely unchecked.

One such example is the school mascot controversy.

Native sports images are often cartoonish or culturally inaccurate, perpetuating false narratives and negative stereotypes of Indigenous people. Sports teams exploit these images at our expense and with little regard for the effects they have on our people, particularly our tribal youth.

The National Congress of American Indians had this to say in a 2013 report on Native mascots:

When exposed to these images, the self-esteem of Native youth is harmfully impacted, their self-confidence erodes, and their sense of identity is severely damaged. Specifically, these stereotypes affect how Native youth view the world and their place in society, while also affecting how society views Native peoples. This creates an inaccurate portrayal of Native peoples and their contributions to society.

Thankfully, we've observed in recent years many schools throughout Connecticut changing their mascots from Native American themes to representations that more appropriately reflect the beauty, diversity and collective strength of their student populations. We hope this trend continues!

On a much broader perspective, the prejudices toward Indigenous people continue to be far more deeply rooted within the fabric of American society.

In 1963, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had this to say about it:

Our nation was born in genocide when it embraced the doctrine that the original American, the Indian, was an inferior race. We are perhaps the only nation which tried as a matter of national policy to wipe out its indigenous population. Moreover, we elevated that tragic experience into a noble crusade. Indeed, even today we have not permitted ourselves to reject or to feel remorse for this shameful episode. Our literature, our films, and our folklore all exalt it.

— Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*, 1963

It's time to change the narrative about Indigenous people for the better, and education is the key solution. As you know, the ancestors of the members of the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation have resided here since time immemorial; long before the existence of this beautiful state we all call home.

And we look forward to the opportunity to tell future generations about the beauty of our culture and the complexity of our unique history and legacy, which is what we have done for more than 23 years at our Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center.

Once again, I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I respectfully ask for the full Committee's endorsement of a Native American studies-focused curriculum, and the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation stands ready to work with you to assist in curriculum development.

Thank you for your time and consideration.



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