

September 2017

Dear Colleague:

As we begin the new school year, I want to take this opportunity to bring forward an issue that many Wisconsin tribal nations have brought to my attention over the last year - American Indian students being prohibited from wearing items of religious and cultural significance, such as traditional regalia and eagle feathers at graduation ceremonies and school-sponsored events.

This is a topic that most often arises at times of special significance such as graduation or times when an American Indian student is being recognized or honored. As part of our conversations with tribal nations in Wisconsin, we have repeatedly heard how important it is for American Indian students and their families to be able to wear cultural and religious items as a way to honor their nation, community, and heritage.

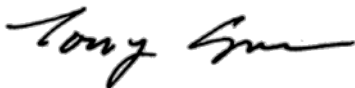
I am asking you to review your policies, connect with the sovereign tribal nations near you, and review with them ways to recognize and honor tribal traditions and practices.

As part of this review, it is important to consider the religious aspects of eagle feathers and other items for tribal members and the legal protections given for religious practices. For instance:

- Wisconsin Statutes s. 115.28(31) requires rules to provide for the reasonable accommodation of a pupil's sincerely held religious beliefs with regard to all examinations and other academic requirements. Further, the related administrative rule, Wis. Admin. Code Chapter PI 41, requires all school boards to develop policies providing for such accommodations.
- Wisconsin Statutes s. 118.13 provides that no person may be denied participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be discriminated against in any curricular, extracurricular, pupil services, recreational or other program or activity because of the sex, race, religion, national origin, ancestry, creed, pregnancy, marital or parental status, sexual orientation or physical, mental, emotional or learning disability. Under the related administrative rule, Wis. Admin. Code Chapter PI 9, school boards are required to develop policies prohibiting discrimination against pupils.

While many school districts already recognize the appropriateness of American Indian students wearing eagle feathers, traditional regalia, and other items, the fact that it remains an issue for many of the sovereign tribal nations in our state of Wisconsin means we still have work to do. I hope you will take this opportunity to deepen relationships and recognize the cultural and religious significance of these items to our sovereign tribal nations and their members in our schools.

Sincerely,



Tony Evers, PhD
State Superintendent

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