



May 16, 2024

Dear Colleague:

As we approach the end of the school year, I want to highlight an issue that remains significant for many Tribal Nations of Wisconsin – 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. For those of you who have already revised your graduation policies to reflect the cultural identities of your American Indian students, we thank you for your work.

In May 2022, I sent a letter in support of American Indian students being able to wear regalia of cultural significance at graduation ceremonies and school events. This letter mirrored correspondence sent by my predecessors, former State Superintendent and now Governor Tony Evers and former State Superintendent Carolyn Stanford Taylor, who asked districts to review their policies, connect with the sovereign Tribal Nations, and discuss with tribal leaders ways to recognize and honor tribal traditions and practices.

As you consider the importance and religious significance of eagle feathers and other cultural items for American Indian students, I want to highlight the state-sanctioned legal protections given for students, such as:

- Wisconsin Statute 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 Statute 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.

Throughout Wisconsin, many school districts have already recognized the importance of American Indian students wearing eagle feathers, traditional regalia, and other items. In addition to school districts' work, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction will continue to work with the Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations to advance a bill that supports pupils wearing traditional tribal regalia at graduation ceremonies or school-sponsored events. We have

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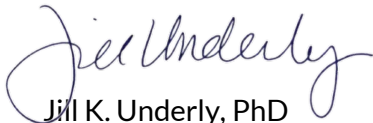
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made significant progress with the legislature in garnering bipartisan support and momentum for this bill.

I hope you will take this opportunity to deepen your district's relationship with the Tribal Nations and communities. Your policies can go a long way in recognizing the cultural and religious significance these specific items have to the students of these sovereign nations. I would note that in addition to tribal regalia, we know that items of cultural significance can affirm the identities and cultural backgrounds of all students. To those of you who have joined us in affirming the identity of our students, regardless of their faith, gender expression, ethnicity, or national background, thank you!

Thank you for your continued efforts to make school a welcoming, safe, and engaging place for all our students, families, communities, and nations each and every day across Wisconsin.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jill Underly". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J".

Jill K. Underly, PhD
State Superintendent

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