

Superintendent [First and Last Name]
Principal [First and Last Name]
[School District Address]

[Date]

Commented [A1]: This template letter is provided as a tool to assist Indigenous students and their families in self-advocating for the right to wear tribal regalia at graduation. It is not legal advice and does not create an attorney-client relationship with the ACLU, the ACLU of South Dakota, or any attorney.

This template letter was last updated in April of 2023.

Dear Superintendent [Last Name] and Principal [Last Name]:

I am writing to let you know that my student, [Name], plans to wear [an eagle feather/eagle plume/beaded graduation cap] during this year's graduation ceremony. State law protects this right, and I respectfully ask that the school district follow the law regarding this matter.

[Student's Name] is [Tribal affiliation/Native American]. Our Native American heritage and traditions are an important part of our family's history, culture, and identity. Under South Dakota law, a public school district may not prohibit a "Native American student from wearing an eagle feather, eagle plume, or an appropriate beaded graduation cap at a school honoring or graduation ceremony."¹ *Thus, the school district must allow [Student's Name] to wear [an eagle feather or eagle plume or beaded graduation cap].*

In addition, although Section 13-1-66 of South Dakota law does not speak directly to students' rights to wear other tribal regalia—for example, traditional Native American dress, beaded medallions, jewelry, moccasins, or other items of cultural and religious significance—allowing these items would be well within the spirit of the statute's intent to protect Native Americans' traditions and expression during graduation ceremonies. Moreover, South Dakota's religious-freedom statute,² as well as federal law,³ may require public schools to allow Indigenous students to wear these items. To that end, I respectfully request that [Student's Name] be permitted to wear [specify other than eagle feather/plume or beaded cap].

Wearing tribal regalia plays an important role in graduation ceremonies for many Indigenous students. These items of cultural and religious significance are typically gifted by students' families or

¹ S.D. Codified Laws § 13-1-66 (2022).

² Under Section 1-1A-4 of South Dakota law, government entities, including public school districts, may not "[s]ubstantially burden a person's exercise of religion unless applying the burden to that person's exercise of religion in a particular situation is essential to further a compelling governmental interest and is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling government interest." The ability to wear tribal regalia during graduation is not only important to [Student's Name] from a cultural perspective, but it is also a core expression of our Native American religious beliefs. Denying [Student's Name] the right to wear these religious items substantially burdens their religious exercise. Generalized school interests in discipline, authority, and uniformity—which have traditionally been asserted to justify school dress codes and grooming policies—are simply inadequate reasons for denying a religious accommodation under this legal standard. Thus, the school must accommodate this religious exercise at graduation. *See, e.g., A.A. ex rel. Betenbaugh v. Needville Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 611 F.3d 248, 265-66 (5th Cir. 2010) (holding that public school requirement that Native American student wear hair in bun or braided and tucked into his collar violated similar Texas religious freedom law.).

³ Public schools' selective or uneven enforcement of a graduation dress code to exclude tribal regalia violates the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. *See generally Waln v. Dysart Sch. Dist.*, 54 F.4th 1152, 1160 (9th Cir. 2022). In addition, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits federally funded schools from discriminating based on race, ethnicity, or national origin. Even if schools do not intend to discriminate, if their policies disproportionately and negatively affect students of a particular race, ethnicity, or national origin, the policies will likely be considered discriminatory. School policies that prevent Indigenous students from wearing tribal regalia may violate this law. *See Indigenous Students Should Be Allowed to Wear Tribal Regalia at Graduation*, ACLU (Apr. 7, 2022), <https://www.aclu.org/news/religious-liberty/indigenous-students-should-be-allowed-to-wear-tribal-regalia-at-graduation>.

Commented [A2]: Consider sending this letter via mail and email. Address the letter to the school district superintendent, the school principal, or both, depending on the situation. For example, if the principal has already stated that the student cannot wear tribal regalia, the letter might be better addressed to the superintendent. In addition, check district policies to see if there is a particular procedure that you should follow.

Commented [A3]: South Dakota law does not explicitly require that students provide any notice of their intent to wear an eagle feather, eagle plume, or beaded cap graduation, or otherwise seek approval to do so. However, the law does allow a school administrator to "determine if a beaded graduation cap is appropriate." Thus, to avoid problems on graduation day, it may be prudent to seek advance approval for a particular beaded cap.

In addition, if school officials have suggested that you may not be allowed to wear tribal regalia, or you are concerned that they will try to prevent you from doing so on graduation day, this letter may assist you in addressing any concerns and ensuring, in advance, that there will not be any problems during graduation—especially if you are seeking to wear tribal regalia other than an eagle feather, eagle plume, or beaded cap.

Commented [A4]: South Dakota law does not require that a student be a member of a Tribe/Band/Nation, but if the student is a member of a Tribe or otherwise associated with a particular Tribe/Band/Nation, you can note that here.

Commented [A5]: South Dakota law protects only the right to wear an eagle feather, an eagle plume, or an "appropriate" beaded cap. However, if the student wishes to wear another item of tribal regalia, *in addition* to an eagle feather or beaded cap it is worth asking school officials to agree.

Use the green highlighted text in this paragraph, footnote 2 (if wearing tribal regalia has religious significance to the student), and footnote 3 to address the other other items of regalia that the student wishes to wear *in addition* to an eagle feather or beaded cap.

If the student does not wish to wear an eagle feather or beaded cap, but some other item of tribal regalia, we recommend instead using one of our template letters pertaining to federal law or state religious freedom laws.

tribal elders to recognize the student's success and academic achievements. Graduation ceremonies are especially meaningful for Native American students because they have long faced structural barriers and discrimination in the educational context and are less likely to graduate from high school than their peers.⁴ Indeed, these students have suffered horrific persecution by the government and education system:

Beginning with the Indian Civilization Act of 1819 and running through the 1960s, the United States enacted laws and implemented policies establishing and supporting Indian boarding schools across the nation. During that time, the purpose of Indian boarding schools was to culturally assimilate Indigenous children by forcibly relocating them from their families and communities to distant residential facilities where their American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian identities, languages, and beliefs were to be forcibly suppressed. . . . [T]he legacy of Indian boarding schools remains, manifesting itself in Indigenous communities through intergenerational trauma, cycles of violence and abuse, disappearance, premature deaths, and other undocumented bodily and mental impacts.⁵

Denying students like [Student's Name] the right to wear tribal regalia at a graduation ceremony further deprives us of our heritage and identity, perpetuating destructive assimilation policies of the past and promoting harmful stereotypes and misunderstandings of Indigenous Peoples.⁶

This letter is our [first/second/third] communication with the school district regarding this matter. [In response to our previous communications, district officials have (fill in)]. Because South Dakota law is clear, and because Native American students deserve to have their culture, faith, and heritage recognized in a manner that is meaningful to that student and their family, we hope that there will be no need to pursue this matter further.

Please contact me as soon as possible at [cell phone/email address] to confirm that [Student's Name] will be allowed to wear [item(s) of tribal regalia] at the upcoming graduation ceremony.

Sincerely,

[Signature of Parent/Guardian]

[Parent/Guardian Name]

⁴ See, e.g., Jinghong Cai, *The Condition of Native American Students*, Nat'l Sch. Bds. Ass'n (Dec. 1, 2020), <https://www.nsba.org/ASBJ/2020/December/condition-native-american-students>.

⁵ Memo from Sec. of the Interior Deb Haaland Regarding Fed. Indian Boarding Sch. Initiative (June 22, 2021) 1, 3 <https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/secint-memo-esb46-01914-federal-indian-boarding-school-truth-initiative-2021-06-22-final508-1.pdf> ("Over the course of the Program, thousands of Indigenous children were removed from their homes and placed in Federal boarding schools across the country. Many who survived the ordeal returned home changed in unimaginable ways, and their experiences still resonate across the generations.").

⁶ See *Becoming Visible: A Landscape Analysis of State Efforts to Provide Native American Education for All*, Nat'l Congress of Am. Indians (Sept. 2019) 8-9 https://www.ncai.org/policy-research-center/research-data/prc-publications/NCAI-Becoming_Visible_Report-Digital_FINAL_10_2019.pdf ("A startling 72 percent of Americans rarely encounter or receive information about Native Americans... Invisibility, myths, and stereotypes about Native peoples perpetuated through K-12 education are reinforced across society, resulting in an enduring and damaging narrative regarding tribal nations and their citizens. The impact is profound. Native Americans live in a culture where they are often misunderstood, stereotyped, and experience racism on a daily basis. The lack of accurate knowledge about Native Americans contributes to these experiences and hinders the ability of all Americans to experience and celebrate the unique cultural identities, histories, and contributions of Native peoples.")

Commented [A6]: If you have previously communicated with school officials about this, use this green highlighted text, and add in any relevant details regarding whom you contacted, when, how, and what they said.

Commented [A7]: You may alter this letter template to come directly from the student.

Commented [A8]: Before sending this self-advocacy letter, check the following:

1. Did you delete all comments in the margins?
2. Did you delete the alternate text (in green highlights) if it does not apply to you?
3. Did you fill in all the necessary information in the highlighted brackets AND delete the brackets and highlights?
4. Did you review any relevant school district policies to determine whether this letter includes all the information required, is addressed to the appropriate person, is submitted within the required timelines, and meets all other requirements of school district policy?