

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

[Date]

Re: Washington law protecting the right to wear tribal regalia at graduation

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

I am writing to let you know you that my student, [Name], plans to wear [specify item(s) of tribal regalia] 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 an enrolled member of the federally recognized [fill in Tribe/Nation/ Band.] Our Native American heritage and traditions are an important part of our family's history and identity. Under Washington law, public schools "may not prohibit students who are members of a federally recognized tribe from wearing traditional tribal regalia or objects of Native American cultural significance along with or attached to a gown at graduation ceremonies or related school events."¹ Thus, the school district must allow [Student's Name] to wear [item(s) of tribal regalia].

Tribal regalia, such as eagle feathers and beadwork on graduation caps, plays an important role in graduation ceremonies for many Native American students. These items are typically gifted to graduating students by their families or tribal elders to recognize the student's success and academic achievements.² 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.³ Indeed, Native American 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

¹ Wash. Rev. Code Ann. § 28A.600.500(1) (2020) (noting that public schools also "may not require such students to wear a cap if it is incompatible with the regalia or significant object").

² See, e.g., *Reaffirmed Commitment & Importance of Students Wearing Traditional Regalia*, Wash. Office of Superintendent of Pub. Instruction (Jan. 30, 2020), <https://www.k12.wa.us/about-osp/ superintendent-chris-reykdal/reaffirmed-commitment-and-importance-students-wearing-traditional-regalia> ("It is important to recognize that, since time immemorial, many tribal nations have viewed the wearing of traditional regalia and items of cultural significance, such as eagle feathers, cedar, beadwork, and other items as sacred to cultural traditions. Particularly, the presentation and wearing of an eagle feather is a high honor in recognition of a great accomplishment. The honoring of a Native student with the presentation of an eagle feather is held in high regard to family, community, and tribal leadership. . . . This is a tremendous opportunity for schools to acknowledge this important honor and legal right of Native students and tribal nations and also recognize the diversity in our shared community.").

³ 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>.

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 Washington, or any attorney.

This template letter was last updated in April of 2023.

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]: Washington law does not explicitly require that students provide any notice of their plan to wear tribal regalia at graduation, or otherwise seek approval to do so.

However, if school officials have suggested that you may not be allowed to wear tribal regalia, or if 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.

Commented [A4]: If the Tribe/Band/Nation in which the student is a member is not federally recognized, or if the student is not a member of a Tribe/Band/Nation, the student's right to wear tribal regalia may still be protected under federal law or under Washington's Constitution. Please check out our other self-advocacy templates to see if they might apply to your situation.

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.⁴

Denying students like [Student's Name] the right to wear tribal regalia during graduation further deprives us of our heritage and identity, perpetuating the destructive assimilation policies of the past and promoting harmful stereotypes and misunderstandings of Indigenous Peoples.⁵ ***It also violates Washington law.***⁶

This letter is my [first/second/third] communication with the school district regarding this matter. [In response to my previous communications, district officials have (fill in).] Because Washington law is clear, and because Native American students deserve to have their culture and heritage recognized in a manner that is meaningful to them and their families, I 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 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.").

⁵ See *Becoming Visible: A Landscape Analysis of State Efforts to Provide Native American Education for All*, Nat'l Congress of Am. Indians (Sep. 2019) 8-9 https://www.ncai.org/policy-research-center/research-data/proc-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.").

⁶ As explained by the Washington Superintendent of Public Instruction, Washington public schools also have a "legal obligation and commitment to fostering the vital government-to-government relationships with the 29 tribes whose boundaries fall within Washington state and the many other tribes who are represented in the public school system." *Reaffirmed Commitment*, *supra* n.2. Thus, "[f]ederally recognized tribes in Washington state are sovereign nations and [the state] fully supports policies that recognize tribal students' specific rights to honor their tribal constitutions, citizenry, and unique tribal cultures." *Id.*

Commented [A5]: 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 [A6]: You may alter to this letter template to come directly from the student.

Commented [A7]: Before sending this self-advocacy letter, check the following:

1. Did you delete all comments in the margins?
2. Did you fill in all the necessary information in the highlighted brackets AND delete the brackets and highlights?
3. Did you delete the alternate text [highlighted in green] if it does not apply to you?
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?