



March 22, 2023

**BY E-MAIL AND MAIL TO:**

Chris Chism, Superintendent  
Pearl Public School District  
3375 Highway 80 East  
Pearl, MS 39208  
*cchism@pearlk12.com*

Sondra Odom, Board President  
Arthur F. Jernigan, Board Attorney  
Pearl Public School District Board of Trustees  
3375 Highway 80 East  
Pearl, MS 39208  
*c/o cgrantham@pearlk12.com*

***Re: Denial of Native American Student's Right to Wear Tribal Regalia***

Dear Superintendent Chism, Board President Odom, and Attorney Jernigan:

We write on behalf of Pearl High School senior Zuri Wilson and her mother, Merissa Wilson. We understand that the District has denied their request for Zuri to wear an eagle feather on her graduation cap, in accordance with her Native American heritage. The District's denial of this accommodation is in direct violation of state law, which provides that "[a] governmental entity may not prohibit an individual from wearing traditional tribal regalia or objects of cultural significance at a public event."<sup>1</sup> The district has no authority to deny the Wilsons' request and must immediately reverse its decision. Moreover, we strongly urge the District to allow Zuri's family to present her with a Native American star quilt as she exits the commencement stage.

**Background**

***The Wilsons' Native American heritage and traditions***

Merissa and Zuri Wilson are enrolled members of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, a federally recognized tribe located in South Dakota. Zuri's citizenship in her Tribe and her family's Native American heritage are an important part of her identity. Wearing an eagle feather attached to a graduation cap at commencement is a generational tradition for the Wilson family, as is the presentation of a star quilt.

---

<sup>1</sup> Miss. Code Ann. § 11-61-3(2) (2020).

To continue this tradition, Zuri’s grandmother plans to present a sacred Eagle feather to her to wear during her upcoming graduation ceremony. Before the feather is given to Zuri, her great-uncle will perform a traditional blessing over it. Immediately after she receives her diploma and exits the commencement stage, the family also plans to present Zuri with a star quilt, which will be made by a family member.

Unfortunately, the 2022-23 Pearl Public School District Student Handbook provides that “students must comply with all aspects of the dress code” to participate in the high school graduation and that “only honor cords and medals provided by Pearl High School will be allowed to be worn.”<sup>2</sup> District policy also forbids the family from presenting a star quilt to Zuri as she exits the commencement stage. In January, Merissa attended a school board meeting to request an exception to these rules. To give context to the request, she highlighted the significance of the eagle feather and star quilt to the family’s Native American heritage, ancestry, and culture. On February 16, 2023, however, the District notified her that the Board had denied the request.

### *The Cultural Significance of Tribal Regalia*

Tribal regalia, such as an eagle feather or beadwork, plays an important role in graduation ceremonies for many Native American students.<sup>3</sup> Eagle feathers are often gifted to graduating students by their families or tribal elders to recognize their success and academic achievements. Likewise, star quilts are “given to mark important life events,”<sup>4</sup> and are “one of the greatest honors among the Lakota, Dakota and other Northern Plains tribes[.]”<sup>5</sup>

Graduation ceremonies are especially meaningful for Native American students, who have long faced structural barriers and discrimination in the educational context and are thus much less likely to graduate from high school than their peers.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Indigenous students have suffered horrific persecution at the hands of our government and education system:

---

<sup>2</sup> Pearl Pub. Sch. Dist. Student/Parent Handbook, Pearl Pub. Sch. Dist., 8 (2022), [https://www.pearl.k12.ms.us/cms/lib/MS01810570/Centricity/Domain/14/PPSD\\_Student\\_Parent\\_Handbook.pdf](https://www.pearl.k12.ms.us/cms/lib/MS01810570/Centricity/Domain/14/PPSD_Student_Parent_Handbook.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Heather L. Weaver, *Indigenous Students Should Be Allowed to Wear Tribal Regalia at Graduation* (Apr. 7, 2022), <https://www.aclu.org/news/religious-liberty/indigenous-students-should-be-allowed-to-wear-tribal-regalia-at-graduation>; Native American Rights Fund, *Wearing Eagle Feathers and Regalia at Graduation*, <https://narf.org/cases/graduation/>.

<sup>4</sup> Sue Pascoe, *Star Quilts are More than Blankets*, *Circling the News* (Sept. 13, 2019), <https://www.circlingthenews.com/star-quilts-are-more-than-blankets/>.

<sup>5</sup> Darren Thompson, *Lakota Star Quilt Maker Shares Her Journey*, *PowWows.Com* (Oct. 10, 2017), <https://www.powwows.com/star-quilt-maker-shares-journey/>.

<sup>6</sup> *See, e.g.*, Sanne Godfrey, *Native students to wear tribal regalia at graduation ceremonies*, *News-Review* (June 2, 2021), [https://www.nrtoday.com/news/education/native-students-to-wear-tribal-regalia-at-graduation-ceremonies/article\\_5cc06dbd-9cc7-5806-a24c-45ab6b3d3e17.html](https://www.nrtoday.com/news/education/native-students-to-wear-tribal-regalia-at-graduation-ceremonies/article_5cc06dbd-9cc7-5806-a24c-45ab6b3d3e17.html).

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.<sup>7</sup>

Zuri's great-grandmother was one of thousands of children removed from their families and stripped of their religious and cultural heritage at Indian boarding schools. Denying Native American students like Zuri the right to wear tribal regalia and engage in other cultural expressions and practices further deprives them of their heritage in the name of assimilation, compounding the violence and oppression that these students and their communities have already suffered.

### **Legal Concerns**

In 2020, Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves signed into law a bill protecting the right of Native Americans to wear tribal regalia.<sup>8</sup> Under the law, no governmental entity may prohibit an individual “who is a member or descendant of a federally recognized Indian tribe” from “wearing traditional tribal regalia or objects of cultural significance at a public event.”<sup>9</sup> A “public event” is defined in

---

(“Graduation rates among Native American students [in Oregon] have historically been lower than those of their white peers, and lower than the state average.”); Nick Lowrey, *Native American students left behind by S.D. education system*, Argus Leader (Nov. 22, 2019), <https://www.argusleader.com/story/news/education/2019/11/22/native-american-students-left-behind-south-dakota-education-system/4269896002/> (“On-time graduation rates for Native American students [in South Dakota] also are lower than for every other racial group in the state at just 54%, compared with the rate of 85% for students of all backgrounds, according to the state report card.”).

<sup>7</sup> Memo from Sec’y. of the Interior Deb Haaland Regarding Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative (June 22, 2021) 1-2, <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.”).

<sup>8</sup> See Miss. Code Ann. § 11-61-3. Pursuant to Miss. Code Ann. § 11-46-1(i), Mississippi’s public-school districts are subject to the tribal-regalia law.

<sup>9</sup> Miss. Code Ann. §§ 11-61-3(2), (3)(a).

the statute as “an event held or sponsored by a governmental entity, including, but not limited to, an award ceremony, *a graduation ceremony* or public meeting.”<sup>10</sup>

The District’s current policy violates this law. We understand that the District may have been unaware of the law’s enactment given that it is relatively new, but the statute makes clear that the District *must* permit Zuri to wear an eagle feather on her graduation cap in accordance with her family’s tradition and her membership in her Tribe.

Furthermore, although the state tribal-regalia law does not speak directly to the Native American practice of gifting star quilts, it does highlight “the unique cultural heritage of federally recognized Indian tribes and the state’s commitment to preserving the cultural integrity of federally recognized Indian tribes.”<sup>11</sup> Permitting the Wilsons to carry out their Lakota tradition of presenting a star quilt as Zuri exits the stage with her diploma would be well within the spirit of the tribal-regalia law.

### **Resolution**

Please let us know by March 29, 2023, whether the District intends to comply with state law by permitting Zuri to wear an eagle feather on her graduation cap during commencement and whether the District will permit the family to present a star quilt to Zuri in accordance with their Native American tradition.

In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact us with questions or to further discuss how the District can ensure that its graduation rules are inclusive of all students and that students of all backgrounds are welcomed and respected at Pearl High School.

Sincerely,

Joshua F. Tom  
Claudia Williams Hyman  
ACLU of Mississippi  
jtom@aclu-ms.org  
cwilliamshyman@aclu-ms.org

Heather L. Weaver  
Daniel Mach  
ACLU Program on Freedom of  
Religion and Belief  
hweaver@aclu.org  
dmach@aclu.org

Morgan E. Saunders  
Matthew Campbell

---

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* § (2)(d) (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* § (1).

Pearl Public School District  
March 22, 2023  
Page 5 of 5

Native American Rights Fund  
Saunders@narf.org  
mcampbell@narf.org