

NOTE TO STUDENTS/FAMILIES:

Oklahoma law protects public-school students’ right to wear tribal regalia at graduation. The law does not require students to provide notice of their intent to do so or otherwise seek approval.

However, if school officials have suggested that students may not be allowed to wear tribal regalia, or if you are concerned that they will try to prevent a student 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.

In addition, Oklahoma’s tribal-regalia law authorizes school districts to adopt a policy that “may specify the characteristics of any garment, jewelry, other adornment, or object that the school or institution finds will endanger the safety of a student or others or interfere with graduation ceremonies if worn by a student.” Thus, you should check to see if your district has adopted a policy to ensure that your tribal regalia complies with it.

(To ensure that you see all instructional comments in the margin of this document, turn on “show comments” in Microsoft Word.)

[Date]

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

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

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

Oklahoma law protects the right of students to wear tribal regalia at graduation. While the law does not require students to notify schools of their intent to do so, because some school officials have indicated that they are not aware of these legal protections, I am writing to let you know that my student, [Name], plans to wear [specify item(s) of tribal regalia] during this year’s graduation ceremony. I respectfully ask that the school district follow the law regarding this matter.

[Student’s Name] is [Tribal affiliation/Native American/Indigenous.] Our [Native American/Indigenous] heritage and traditions are an important part of our family’s history and identity. Under Oklahoma law, public-school students “may wear tribal regalia during the school’s official graduation ceremonies, whether held at a public or private location.”¹ Tribal regalia is defined as “traditional garments, jewelry, other adornments such as an eagle feather, an eagle plume, a beaded cap, a stole, or similar objects of cultural and religious significance worn by

¹ Okla. Stat. Ann. tit. 70, § 24-160(A)(1) (eff. July 1, 2023) (enacting Sen. Bill No. 429).

members of a federally recognized Indian tribe or the tribe of another country.”² 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 Indigenous students. These items are typically gifted to graduating students by their families or tribal elders to recognize the student’s success and academic achievements. Graduation ceremonies are especially meaningful for Indigenous students because they have long faced structural barriers and discrimination in the educational context and, as a result, may be less likely to graduate from high school than their peers.³ Indeed, Indigenous 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.⁴

As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch recently explained, “[u]pon the children’s arrival, the boarding schools would often . . . cut their hair . . . and confiscate their traditional clothes.”⁵ The schools also “frequently prohibited children from speaking their native language or engaging in customary cultural or religious practice.”⁶

The appalling legacy of Indian boarding schools remains today, “manifesting itself in Indigenous communities through intergenerational trauma, cycles of violence and abuse, disappearance, premature deaths, and other undocumented bodily and mental impacts.”⁷ Denying students like [Student’s Name] the right to wear tribal regalia during graduation further deprives them of their heritage and identity, perpetuating the destructive assimilation policies of the past

² *Id.* § 24-160(2)(D). While many Indigenous students are enrolled members of federally recognized Tribes, it is not required by the statute in order to wear tribal regalia at graduation.

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>.

⁴ Memo from Sec. of the Interior Deb Haaland Regarding Fed. Indian Boarding Sch. Initiative (June 22, 2021) 1 <https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/secint-memo-esb46-01914-federal-indian-boarding-school-truth-initiative-2021-06-22-final508-1.pdf>.

⁵ *Haaland v. Brackeen*, 599 U.S. 255, 300 (2023) (Gorsuch, J., concurring) (internal citations omitted).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Memo from Sec. of the Interior, *supra* n.4, at 1, 3 (“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.”).

and promoting harmful stereotypes and misunderstandings of Indigenous Peoples.⁸ *It also violates Oklahoma law.*

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 Oklahoma law is clear, and because Indigenous 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]

⁸ 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://archive.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.”).