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On November 21st, 2013, Missisquoi Valley Union High School (MVU) became the first Vermont school to raise an Abenaki flag. The Swanton-Highgate area is part of the Abenaki Nation of Missisquoi's traditional homeland. The flag raising event marked a mutuality of respect between the school and the Abenaki tribe. The gathering brought hundreds of Abenaki community members to MVU. Our "Circle of Courage" student drummers performed, and members of both the Missisquoi Tribal Council and Title VI Indian Education Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) gave thanks. Thus, Peter D'Auria's "Vermont Digger" article (February 20th, 2023) Vermont Equity Organizations Set To Retire 8 School Mascots came as a stunning surprise. Neither Judy Dow nor Mia Schultz bothered to contact us. Rather, they took it upon themselves to file a formal complaint seeking to remove several school mascots, arguing they were "offensive and harmful to Vermont students." Gedakina, a non-profit organization which supports Indigenous culture and teachings, led by Judy Dow, was quoted as saying "the mascots in question are upholding harmful legacies that continue to harm our children." This statement was particularly upsetting as MVU is a school where over 25% of the students are Abenaki. When our students graduate, it is an event shared by many Abenaki community members. The school traditions are on display, many of which evoke the Thunderbird. At no time does the symbol evoke recrimination. In 1971 when the school district chose the Thunderbird, it was a welcome acknowledgement of the important history of this area's indigenous people. Indeed, the late Chief Homer St. Francis was approached by the school district as they considered selecting the Thunderbird as their mascot. Chief St. Francis felt the Thunderbird, as a symbol of strength and perseverance, was appreciated by the Abenaki community. After many years when the presence of the Abenaki was denied, it was a welcome gesture of acceptance and acknowledgement of the area's indigenous people. While the struggle for equity of educational opportunity was yet to surface for Abenaki students at MVU, the use of animal imagery was never seen as a deterrent by Abenaki leadership. In no way would we suggest the use of mascots is always benign; yet, at the same time we would not ascribe to a blanket condemnation. There are hundreds of Native perspectives and how one tribe views imagery could be vastly different from another. There is no generic "Native American" viewpoint. In contrast to what is being suggested by the article, the use of an indigenous symbol provides the indigenous students with a sense of pride and connection to their heritage. We do not believe the Thunderbird has any harmful imagery for any student at MVU, including our Abenaki population. When the legislature passed Act 152, animal imagery was not included when condemning certain mascots. The subjective nature of animal use among Native tribes would preclude a wholesale removal and yet that is what Dow and Schultz have called for.

Indeed, the harmful effects of pejorative mascots is something the Missisquoi tribe understands and objects to. That is why we can support Act 152, in the knowledge that in certain instances, the importance of local control may be substituted for the common good. Moreover, the use of the Thunderbird is a textbook example of why protocols developed locally are so important. The Abenaki community had several opportunities for input when MVU was developing its own procedures and selecting a mascot over 50 years ago. The importance of expressing one's voice is that we can promote the building up of a conversation, rather than tearing it down. Judy Dow and Mia Schultz sought no conversation with the local MVU community or the Abenaki tribe. They have filed a complaint that, if followed by the State Agency of Education, might dictate terms of mascot use to the local school board. Here, the use of the Thunderbird - first discussed in 1971 - might be taken away despite the Abenaki

community believing in its original intent: to have the school use the Thunderbird symbolically to convey strength, perseverance, and heroism as key characteristics for all students to emulate. It is here where the two authors subscribe to their own intellectual and moral superiority in telling the Missisquoi tribe, for instance, how to think. As such, there is nothing more debilitating to a Native sensibility than being told, like a child, to follow some proscriptive order.

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