

**Directions for your two page spread in your Reader’s Notebook:**

- 1. Read and jot on one page in your Reader’s Notebook. Keep track of thinking as you read.  
Non-fiction jot ideas:**

*key ideas	*quotes	*questions	*key vocab	*important people	*sketches
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- 2. Write a full page response to ONE of the prompts at the end of the article or an idea of your choice on the next page in your reader’s notebook. This is your chance to communicate your thinking about one idea.**

## Is the bell tolling for Native American mascots?

Source: John Wisely, Detroit Free Press June 22, 2020

More than 50 alumni of Huron High School in Southern Wayne County are asking the district to quit using a Native American team mascot and the imagery that goes with it.

"In the wake of community organizing and demonstrating around the state, country and world in response to the death of George Floyd and the recognition of ongoing systemic racism, this letter serves to denounce the use of Native American stereotypes and imagery in all Huron School District capacities," the alumni wrote to superintendent Donovan Rowe last week.

Some of the former students plan to attend the school board meeting Monday to press for the change. Organizers of the effort say they don't want to detract from the Black Lives Matter movement, but rather to highlight another injustice that must be addressed.

It's a topic being discussed in other places as well, said Melissa Kiesewetter, tribal liaison at the Michigan Department of Civil Rights.

"George Floyd’s murder and the ensuing protests have caused us to look at things some of us take for granted and consider how they impact everyone in a community," Kiesewetter said. "There is renewed interest in removing mascots the same way there is in removing statues of racist generals and explorers. It is long-overdue recognition that the use of these images tells a story about who and what we value or devalue."

Rowe acknowledged receiving the alumni letter, but didn't commit to any changes.

"I am thankful to this group of former students for bringing these important concerns to us," Rowe said. "The Huron School District values the opportunity to engage in an important dialogue pertaining to the use of Native American iconography. Our community continues to learn and grow, and we are striving to be more informed and educated pertaining to the treatment and use of Native American representations and symbols."

### Controversial mascots

For years, schools across Michigan and around the country have been urged to eliminate Native American mascots and symbols.

In 2001, before some of the backers of the current effort at Huron High School were even born, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights [issued a statement](#) urging an end to such mascots, saying they "may create a racially hostile educational environment intimidating to Indian students."

A year later, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission [issued its own resolution](#) opposing such symbols and urging schools and their communities to work together to replace them. In 2003, the State Board of Education [adopted a resolution](#) as well, recommending "the elimination of American Indian mascots, nicknames, logos, fight songs, insignias, antics and team descriptors by all Michigan schools."

The Michigan Civil Rights Commission said more than three dozen schools still use Native American mascots or other imagery in Michigan. A list of such mascots compiled by the department in 2013 showed the most commonly used names were:

- Indians - 8
- Warriors - 7
- Chiefs/Chieftans 7
- Redskins 6
- Big Reds 3

Other names included Braves, Redmen and Mohawks.

The commission has received three complaints about their use in recent years. One of those complaints was withdrawn, but the other two remain under investigation, Kiesewetter said.

### **Planting a spear**

In some places, the mascots have been used for a century or more. Huron High, five miles south of Metro Airport, is home of the Chiefs and Native American imagery is found throughout the school including Indian heads in headdress on team apparel and on the wall of the gym. Arrowheads are used as directional markers. The cafeteria includes a totem pole.

"You can think back to celebrating Thanksgiving and dressing up as Native Americans with headdresses and making longhouses. That was apparent as early on as elementary school," said Dylan Offman, one of the organizers of the effort, who spent 12 years in Huron Schools before graduating in 2018. "Seeing people dress up as natives at football games and planting a spear into the field, I can still remember that."

Offman, whose ancestors include members of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina, said his generation of Huron grads wants change.

"It kind of brought about a thought of, well, what can we do?" he said "How can we in fact make change in our own community? This was one way, one opportunity that we saw of something that could actively be improved."

The alumni said they expect resistance to the idea.

"One of our sayings that we used to say, is: Once a chief always a chief," said Jillian Umin, a 2018 grad. "So I feel like people are going to take that to heart."

### **Other changes**

Since the early 1900s, teams at Belding High School, about 30 miles northeast of Grand Rapids, were known as the Redskins. In 2016, the school board there voted to end the use of that word and later adopted the name the Black Knights.

The school had phased out the use of the headdress logo years before but the issue came up again when several wrestlers advanced in the state tournament. Parents printed up shirts for them that depicted a skeleton head with a headdress.

"The superintendent at the time said those kids will not wrestle if they wear those shirts," said current Superintendent Brent Noskey. The parents approached the Board of Education arguing that if they couldn't use the logo, it should be retired entirely.

"They were trying to pressure the board," Noskey said.

The board wouldn't budge and eventually voted unanimously to do away with the Redskin name and mascot.

Noskey said the issue divided the community. He estimates that 50% wanted to keep the old name, 30% wanted to change and 20% were indifferent. The district set up a committee to address the issue, and scheduled separate meetings so that school board meetings didn't devolve into shouting matches, he said.

The committee invited opponents and proponents to bring in speakers to make their cases. One dramatic moment came when an alumnus who now serves as a lawyer for some of the tribes based in the Upper Peninsula addressed the group.

"He was wearing his Redskins jacket when he spoke," Noskey said. "He said that when he was in school, we were all proud of it. But then he took off his jacket and said 'that time is past. It really is racist.' "

### **Help with costs**

The change required new uniforms, new signs and the change of other symbols. The school district received a grant of almost \$335,000 from the Native American Heritage Fund to help cover the costs.

"Listen, if your community decides to change the mascot, you have funds here available that will help offset costs," said fund chairman Jamie Stuck, who also serves as tribal chairman of the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi, based in Athens, Michigan, near Kalamazoo.

Stuck said money in the fund comes from a share of tribal gaming revenue. It varies from year to year, but under the gaming compacts the tribes have with the State of Michigan, it can't exceed \$500,000 at one time.

Stuck said board members of the fund are eager to help not only with schools changing mascot names, but also other efforts to support Native American culture, history and language. It's not just Native American mascots it helps retire.

Last year, the fund gave \$98,000 to Godfrey-Lee Public Schools near Wyoming, Michigan, to help cover the costs of renaming its team, the Rebels, which featured a Confederate soldier as a mascot. The fund normally has a spring deadline for grant applications, but because of the COVID-19 shutdowns, it is still taking applications, Stuck said.

The school board in Paw Paw, west of Kalamazoo, in March voted to [drop the use](#) of the name Redskins for teams there.

"We are in the process of retiring our Redskin nickname here in Paw Paw and looking to adopt a new one here in the next few weeks," said Schools Superintendent Rick Reo.

The decision wasn't taken lightly in Paw Paw. Just three years earlier, the school board voted to retain the nickname, despite requests to end it.

"Part of the issue is that division, we talked a lot about that," he said. "Folks are divided — even the Native American community is divided."

Reo said many people, including some Native Americans, didn't want to change, but ultimately, the school board voted 6-1 to do it.

Since the decision, the district has established a committee made up of educators, students and others from the community to vet potential nicknames. The district plans to apply for a grant from the Native American Heritage Fund, Reo said.

"I hope they do," Stuck said.

### **'The R-word'**

Stuck said it's important to note that Native Americans are not universally opposed to the use of names like the chiefs, if they are done in a respectful way. He notes that Central Michigan University uses the Chippewa nickname and has worked closely with local tribes to make sure that images are respectful. But he won't even speak the term Redskin.

"I think we can all agree at the national and regional level that the R-word is just inexcusable," he said. "But the other mascot names, you know, are opened up for discretionary interpretation."

Stuck's advice to schools struggling with how to deal with a controversial mascot is to first reach out to the people most likely to be offended: Native Americans.

"As far as being educated, some people may think mascots honor tribes, but they never consult with the tribes to find out if that's the case," he said.

Tribes are not only concerned about names and images, but also about the education that occurs within the schools related to Native American history and culture. He said he also wants Native American students who attend some of these schools to do so without facing discrimination or humiliation.

At Huron, the alumni said they think they can make a difference, but they recognize some people will be reluctant to change. The school is named Huron and so is the township. The name Chiefs and its logo have been around for decades.

"For me it's simple, if we're going to put something on our school, even if it is meant for respectful purposes, we're going to offend the people who we're trying to respect," said Chad Strugil, a 2019 graduate. "Why not feel them out and understand where they're coming from? If we're trying to respect that, then we should do it assuming we're going to listen to what their need is."

**Possible Response Ideas** (see the directions at the top of the article):

- What are your thoughts about the use of mascots named after Native American tribes? Explain.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a writing technique or strategy used by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.