



P.O. Box 219, 11868 ACADEMY STREET, CHAUMONT, NY 13622

phone: 315-649-2417 ♦ fax: 315-649-2663 ♦ website: www.lymecsd.org

CAMMY J. MORRISON, SUPERINTENDENT

MEMORANDUM

To: Lyme Central School Staff and Community
From: Cammy J. Morrison—Superintendent *cm*
Date: January 20, 2022
RE: LCS Mascot, Logo and Nickname

Good Afternoon All ~ I hope this message finds you and yours well!

On October 12, 2021 I sent a memo to our LCS families providing information regarding a communication *I received* from the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI). In part, that communication read:

“On behalf of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), I am writing in response to a request for assistance that we received from a member of the Lyme Central School community regarding the district's use of its “Indians” mascot. This individual asked if NCAI would provide school and district administrators with some general information about the facts concerning the harms caused by the continued use of Native “themed” mascots in sports and popular culture...”

Around the same time as the District received the communication from NCAI, the District also shared under the Community Tab on our website the numerous resources provided to us by the NCAI. Many of those resources focused on the topic of the mascots. During a Board of Education meeting that then followed, I recommended our school community take the time to review and utilize those resources in order to educate ourselves in preparation of beginning our informed conversations in January of 2022. That time has now arrived.

It is also important for the LCS community to be made aware of very recent developments regarding the use of Native American mascots that have occurred over the past six months, and since NCAI's communication to the District. On August 23, 2021, the New York State Commissioner of Education issued a stay order against the Cambridge Central School District over its decision in July to rescind a Board decision to remove their use of a Native American mascot and logo. At the time, the stay order did not receive much attention and the LCS District was not particularly aware of this decision.

Then, on November 29th, the Commissioner of Education issued her final decision in the Cambridge matter. In that decision, the Commissioner made special mention that nearly 20 years ago, in 2001, that the then Commissioner of Education in a letter to school districts *“asked local Boards of Education to end the use of Native American mascots as soon as practical.”* The Commissioner went on to find that the Cambridge Board of Education's decision to rescind and reverse the discontinuation of the use of its Native American mascot and logo was inappropriate and directed the District and the Board of Education to remove the “Indian” mascot from the District name and imagery. The issue in this particular school district was the subject of long-standing disagreements and costly legal litigation, and to *no avail*. The

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Commissioner ordered the District to remove the Native American imagery no later than July 1, 2022. The Commissioner then reminded the District, its Administration, and the Board of Education of the harsh consequences for disregarding a directive of the Commissioner and the State Education Department, which included, *but was not limited to*, the potential loss of state aid to the district and the removal of Board of Education members. In an Op Ed news article published by the Commissioner of Education in an Albany newspaper following that decision, the Commissioner gave mention to other districts with similar mascots, names and logos. The Commissioner strongly advised that the decision in the Cambridge case *applied equally to any district in the state still retaining and using Native American imagery and those Districts were strongly advised to follow the same course of action laid out for the Cambridge School District.*

While a directive from the Commissioner of Education to a public school district is certainly a compelling enough reason to impose a mascot change, I would suggest that we, as a District and a community, will and should do so regardless. Making this change, at this time, clearly demonstrates our mutual respect for **all** diverse groups inside and outside of our community. Please consider the following: The LCS community *is* compassionate, generous, hardworking, and educated. We *are* kind, thoughtful, and tough when necessary. We pull together in hard times and celebrate together in good times. It is **not**, *in my humble and respectful opinion*, a school mascot that defines our students, or community, or what makes the Lyme Central School such a special community. ***It is the people and the values we hold that make us the community we are, and it is those qualities that define us. You, and your families are what make Lyme special.***

As a District we have shown our “Indian” *pride*, as demonstrated by our “rebranding” a couple years ago when we displayed our mascot on our gymnasium floor, on our windows, on entrance rugs, score boards and message boards. That was, however, before we were presented with *only the Commissioner’s ruling*. It was also before, *and speaking for myself*, I fully considered or understood the views of individuals from the NCAI. I’m hopeful you will agree it is time for us to listen and learn. While educating myself, I have learned a number of important lessons. First, that to many, or even most, who identify as Native/Indigenous, (not those who share the heritage but actually identify as Native American under Federal Law), they view our belief that through our mascot we are paying tribute and showing respect to Indigenous People, as a misguided understanding. While we have only ever operated with the mindset that we are proud of the *Indians* name and therefore, “justified” in using a mascot with native likeness, our friends from the NCAI are respectfully clarifying that their perspective differs immensely. Quotes such as, “We are a People, not a Mascot” or maybe more so, the cartoon depiction I saw while watching a webinar were eye opening to me. The webinars drew poignant attention to the issue by showing a drawing of the “Cleveland Indians” along with the question of how we would react to “similar” names/drawings *instead*, such as the “Cleveland Asians or Cleveland Africans or Cleveland Hispanics.” Are one of those names really any less offensive than the other?

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While I understand there will be a plethora of views and emotions shown both *for* and *against* a mascot change, we too must recognize and consider what actions, and behaviors, are socially acceptable and appropriate in current times. It is not in the best interest of the district to wait until the Commissioner specifically directs Lyme Central to comply. I believe that resisting this change will be a failure to embrace the opportunity that is before us as a school and a community, and that there is an opportunity to make a positive change for students and our community. As such, the District *will be* exploring all of its options with the goal of successfully maneuvering what is *undeniably* a sensitive and multifaceted topic: changing our school mascot.

We look forward to engaging with our community and all interested stakeholders as we strive to make the Lyme Central School District the best and most inclusive District it can be. We will look for input from creative students and community members for logos, signs and even mascot ideas, and hope that a local contest will help us identify a new stronger, diverse symbol of LCS pride! Small (socially distanced) in-person meetings will be scheduled soon!

I will thank you in advance for your patience and consideration, and for keeping an open mind *and heart* as we strive to do what is best for our students and our community, and to be examples of which all of our students can be proud.

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