



Review of the School Name by the Board of Trustees

In the months leading up to the school's Centennial celebration (2022), several Trustees, faculty, and other members of the Indian Mountain School (IMS) community posed the question of whether the school's name should be changed. This question was raised in the context of changes adopted by other educational institutions and professional sports teams with names or mascots referencing or depicting indigenous persons. As part of the 5-year strategic plan adopted by IMS in 2022, the Board of Trustees committed to conduct a review of our school's name, including: understanding the origins and use of the school's name; considering the impact of our school's name on our community and/or indigenous persons; and weighing the potential impact of a change in school name.

Our review of this matter, initiated in 2023, included several sources of input:

- Review of IMS archives for records related to the school's name;
- Review of other historical records regarding populations indigenous to the region;
- Conversations with IMS alumni, faculty, staff, and current parents; as well as
- Interviews with indigenous persons, including tribal leaders, senior staff from cultural institutions and other experts in the history of indigenous populations in our region.

In the pages that follow, we summarize the Board's review of this matter, organized in five parts: (1) a brief overview of terminology referring to American Indian, Native American, or indigenous populations in the U.S.; (2) examples of institutions or organizations with names or mascots referencing or depicting indigenous persons; (3) a summary of what is known about the origins and use of the school's name; (4) perspectives on the name of our school as shared by members of the IMS community, as well as members of the indigenous community and others with relevant expertise; and following from these (5) our conclusions and recommendations for the path forward.

Terminology Referring to Indian, Native American, or Indigenous Populations in the U.S.

Scholars and advocates broadly advise that indigenous persons prefer to be identified based on the specific tribe or tradition that is their heritage.¹ We recognize that there are and have been hundreds of tribes indigenous to the land on which the United States currently sits. Acknowledging the varied cultures and histories of these tribes, we observe

¹ <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/faq/did-you-know>.

“American Indian, Native American, and Indigenous” as three terms most frequently used to describe these populations collectively.

- **Indian or American Indian.** Use of the term “Indian” to describe persons indigenous to the Western Hemisphere appears to have originated when Christopher Columbus arrived in the Antilles and described local inhabitants as “Indians” based on a mistaken belief that he had reached the Indian Ocean.² “Indian” and “American Indian” were the terms most often used from the period of European colonization through the middle to late twentieth century, and continue to remain in widespread use.
- **Native American.** The term “Native American” came into widespread use in the 1960s, motivated by several factors: concern for the association of “Indian” and “Indian American” with long-standing discrimination toward indigenous populations during the prior period; a desire to correct for the inaccurate assumption of Columbus that he had reached the Indian Ocean; and interest in a term that is more descriptive of Native Americans having inhabited the region prior to European colonization.
- **Indigenous.** The term “indigenous” was first adopted by the United Nations in 2000 to describe populations that originated in the territory on which the United States was formed.³ Some have favored the term as descriptive of a population’s origination without use of terms like “Indians” or “natives” which historically have been used pejoratively in some contexts, and without use of “American” as itself derived from the name of a European explorer.

In 1995, a supplemental research study for the US Census asked persons identifying as indigenous whether they preferred to describe themselves as American Indian, Alaska Native, Native American, some other term, or no preference.” 50% chose the term American Indian as the one they preferred, whereas 37% chose Native American.⁴ We have not found a more recent research study of this kind. However, according to the National Museum of the American Indian: “American Indian, Indian, Native American, or Native are acceptable and often used interchangeably in the United States; however, Native Peoples often have individual preferences on how they would like to be addressed.”⁵

² [Adams, Cecil](#) (October 25, 2001). ["Does "Indian" derive from Columbus's description of Native Americans as "una gente in Dios"?"](#). *The Straight Dope*.

³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tribal-Nomenclature-American-Indian-Native-American-and-First-Nation-1386025>

⁴ Tucker, Clyde; Kojetin, Brian; Harrison, Roderick (May 1995). ["A statistical analysis of the CPS supplement on race and ethnic origin"](#). *Census.gov*. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bureau of the Census.

⁵ <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/informational/impact-words-tips>

Institutions and Organizations Named in Relation to Indigenous Populations

Over the last several years, numerous organizations have re-evaluated the use of names or images related to indigenous populations, including sports, entertainment, and hospitality enterprises; educational institutions; as well as historical, cultural and governmental agencies.

- **Sports, Entertainment, and Hospitality Enterprises.** Between 2020 and 2022, the Washington Redskins were re-branded as the Washington Football Team and subsequently as the Washington Commanders, based on recognition that the “Redskins” name and imagery (both on uniforms and in the mascot) were racist and derogatory.⁶ In 2018, the Cleveland Indians baseball team discontinued the use of its mascot image which was widely seen as reflecting derogatory stereotypes which are hurtful toward indigenous persons and harmful more broadly.⁷ In 2021, the team changed its name to the Cleveland Guardians.⁸ During this same timeframe, the Atlanta Braves (baseball) and Kansas City Chiefs (football) have maintained their names; however, each has faced pressure to discourage fans’ use of chants and rituals which are broadly seen as offensive. In 2021, Squaw Valley ski resort was rebranded as Palisades Tahoe, out of acknowledgement that the term “squaw” has been historically used as a derogatory term for indigenous North American women.⁹
- **Educational Institutions.** Numerous colleges, universities, secondary schools, and primary schools historically adopted mascots depicting Native Americans, sometimes including stereotyping or otherwise offensive imagery. In 2002, the National Congress of American Indians, founded in 1944 to serve the interests of tribal governments and communities, adopted a resolution to “support the elimination of derogatory mascots, slogans, and team names” in schools from sports teams including in school. The organization currently tracks approximately 1,900 K-12 schools with native-themed mascots and has reported a dozen or more schools that have eliminated native-themed mascots each of the last several years.¹⁰ Similar changes have been adopted among universities. As a notable exception, Florida State University has maintained its use of the Seminole as its team name, with support from the Seminole Tribe in Florida based on an historical relationship of cultural exchange between the university and the tribe.¹¹

⁶ Jhabvala, Nicki (February 2, 2022). "[Washington Football Team announces 'Commanders' as its new name](#)". *The Washington Post*. Retrieved February 2, 2022.

⁷ "[Legislative efforts to eliminate native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos: Slow but steady progress post-APA resolution](#)". American Psychological Association. August 2010. Retrieved January 23, 2013.

⁸ Hoynes, Paul (July 23, 2021). "[Cleveland Indians choose Guardians as new team name](#)". *The Plain Dealer*. Retrieved September 26, 2021.

⁹ "[California ski resort officially removes offensive word](#)". *Indian Country Today*. Associated Press. 13 September 2021. Retrieved 9 December 2021.

¹⁰ <https://cdn.sanity.io/files/raa5sn1v/production/26970695b1fafd039520278b8fd38abf077f6838.pdf>

¹¹

https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/colleges/florida-states-unusual-bond-with-seminole-tribe-puts-mascot-debate-in-a-different-light/2014/12/29/5386841a-8eea-11e4-ba53-a477d66580ed_story.html

- **Historical, Cultural, and Government Agencies.** “American Indian” continues to be the term used in U.S. federal laws, including by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget through the U.S. Census Bureau. Numerous government agencies and non-governmental historical/cultural institutions use the term “Indian” or “American Indian” in their name, examples including the Bureau of Indian Affairs (within the U.S. Department of the Interior), and the National Museum of the American Indian. In most cases, the names of these organizations reflect terminology that prevailed at the time they were founded or named. While there have been calls for renaming some of these institutions, for the most part they have preserved their established names, with apparently broad acceptance among indigenous populations whose heritage or interests are protected by these organizations.

The examples outlined above vary with respect to both: whether the organizations have adopted names, mascots, images, or rituals that foster stereotypes and/or are derogative and offensive; and whether the name of the organization is based on an authentic historical (or ongoing) connection with indigenous populations.

What is Known About the Name of Our School and the Land on Which It Sits

Our school has borne the name “Indian Mountain School” since 1922. The school was named after the mountain on which it was established, as was Indian Mountain Road.

Research conducted by IMS 7th graders in 2021 reflected that “Indian Mountain School” is located on the ancestral land of the Mohicans, currently referred to as the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians.”¹² In 1988, Timothy Binzen documented the history of Mohicans in the region, including Mohican settlements spanning present day Salisbury, Lakeville, Sharon, and Millerton; the exchange of land between Mohican tribes and English and Dutch colonialists in the early 18th century; and the persistence of Mohicans in our region despite significant emigration to Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Canada for social, economic and religious reasons.¹³ Mr. Binzen currently serves with the US Fish and Wildlife Service as the Regional Native American Liaison for the Northeast and Southeast regions, and was consulted as part of IMS’s review of this matter.

In the course of our review of the school’s name, we contacted the Town of Salisbury for historical records in the hopes of better understanding the naming of Indian Mountain Road, which we presume to have predated the naming of the school. However, we were advised that records that may have shed light on this history were likely destroyed in a fire that destroyed the Salisbury Town Hall in 1985.

In contrast with many of the other schools and professional sports teams previously described, Indian Mountain School does not have a mascot depicting or referring to Native American populations. The “Falcon” has been the school’s mascot dating back to

¹² <https://www.indianmountain.org/blog/ims-land-acknowledgement-statement-a-commitment-to-education/>

¹³ Timothy Binzen, “Mohican Lands and Colonial Corners: Weataug, Wechquadnach and the Connecticut Colony 1675-1750.”

1987. We do not have any record of the school adopting an “Indian” mascot prior to that date. The school does not currently use any iconography related to Native Americans or indigenous cultures, either in IMS-branded apparel or other materials; and we have not uncovered examples of any such imagery formally adopted by the school in years past. While we are not aware of any pejorative depictions of Native Americans or misappropriation of Native American culture by the IMS community, nor can we be sure that none occurred over the last century, particularly considering the history of prejudice toward Native Americans that was pervasive in the U.S. through much of the twentieth century.

Perspectives on the School Name

When members of our community have raised the question of the school’s name, they have typically framed the question in the context of changes adopted by other institutions such as those previously described. To paraphrase a common form of the question, “Given the trends we are seeing elsewhere in the country, there is no way it will be named Indian Mountain School in 10 years or in 100 years. So shouldn’t we change it now?”

Several have raised a concern for what impression the school’s name may form for persons outside the IMS community, whether that be prospective families or indigenous persons. At its root, the concern appears to be driven by the assumption or belief held by some that the term “Indian” may be offensive to indigenous persons.

Readers may or may not consider it important to our review, but we note in the spirit of transparency that none of the persons who have raised questions to the Board about the school’s name has identified themselves as being indigenous. This is not to dismiss the concern. Quite to the contrary, the Board recognizes the obligation that each of us must “Be the Change” – an IMS principle that is especially important given the paucity of indigenous representation in our community.

Following our training in diversity, equity, and inclusion practices, the Board sought to gather input from persons of indigenous heritage who may be personally affected by the school’s name or may bring other personal or professional experience relevant to the question. This has included conversations we have held with indigenous alumni, leaders from indigenous tribes in the Northeast and other parts of the U.S., as well as staff of cultural institutions honoring the legacy of indigenous populations in the U.S.. Although we acknowledge that no one individual nor several individuals can represent the preferences of the indigenous community as a whole, we nonetheless believe that these conversations were important (and continue to be important) to address the question raised by non-indigenous persons in the IMS community.

To date, none of the indigenous persons interviewed as part of our review has recommended that IMS change our name. Overwhelmingly, indigenous persons and experts in indigenous history interviewed as part of the Board’s review have urged that

we should not change the school's name out of concern that to change the school's name would simply contribute to further erasure of the history of people indigenous to the region. Rather, they have encouraged that IMS should draw upon its name as an opportunity to raise awareness of the history of indigenous populations from our region.

Conclusions

Based on the information gathered during our review, thus far, we have not found support for changing the school's name. Specific considerations include the following:

- 1) While the term "Indian" was used in the U.S. throughout a period of discrimination toward indigenous persons, the term does not appear to be offensive to indigenous persons; while other terms are preferred by some indigenous persons, "Indian" continues to be widely used by many indigenous persons in the U.S. and by significant institutions in the U.S. whose mission is to honor the culture and rights of indigenous people in the U.S.;
- 2) Examples of schools, sports teams, and other organizations that have changed their name or branding away from Native American representations are categorically different from IMS for their use of names, images, and rituals that are pejorative, derogatory, and offensive; in contrast, IMS has not, does not, and (we pledge) shall not ever use such images or rituals in ways that belittle or demean indigenous people;
- 3) By retaining the name Indian Mountain School, the school does not (and should not) claim to share cultural heritage with the indigenous community; rather, the school was named after the mountain on which it sits, and the school's name authentically reflects our values to live in harmony with nature and to promote environmental sustainability; and
- 4) Most persuasively, as articulated by indigenous persons consulted during our review, changing the school's name may be more harmful than helpful as it would contribute to erasure of the history of indigenous populations from our region.

By virtue of the school's name, Indian Mountain School has an opportunity to increase awareness of the history of indigenous populations in our region. We also have an obligation to acknowledge the impact of colonization on indigenous populations, as well as the impact of discrimination toward indigenous populations as it persisted through the 20th century and may continue to impact indigenous communities today.

Undoubtedly our efforts to build awareness of indigenous history will include continued celebration of indigenous history and culture each year on Indigenous People's Day. It should also include broader exploration of indigenous history and culture throughout the school year, as part of the school's social studies and history curriculum. Given limited indigenous representation within our community, we may also explore the potential for faculty recruitment and/or financial aid designated for persons of indigenous heritage.

As we advance such efforts, however, we are mindful that the school should not “lean into our brand” in a way that could be perceived as trying to derive reputational benefit from association with indigenous cultures. We must acknowledge that our school’s name is an artifact of our location on Indian Mountain; and that we do not otherwise bear an historical connection with indigenous populations. Our relationship with the indigenous community needs to be developed over time based on greater and more visible representation, authentic relationships, cultural exchange, and academic exploration.

While the above reflects the Board’s current perspective, based on available information and perspectives shared to date, we remain open to further input from the IMS community as well as indigenous communities. Depending on further feedback received, the Board may choose to revisit this matter. We recognize that indigenous persons differ in their preferred terms for describing themselves and their heritage, and these preferences may change over time. Based on this or other factors that may be presented to us, the Board may choose to further re-consider the name of the school in the future.