

# Inclusive process led to appropriate recommendation

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J.L. Sousa, Eagle file photo

A replica of the original Napa High School Indian logo is seen in the lobby of the Napa Valley Unified School District auditorium. The original, created in 1937 by Charlie Ratto, is now on display in the school attendance office.

In today's society, we see examples of people talking but not listening, of preparing words to refute others' points of view rather than putting ourselves in

their shoes and considering an issue with a new set of eyes.

So when Napa Valley Unified School District and Napa High School, in particular, heard from members of our community that it was time to discontinue the use of an Indian as a school mascot, we knew there was more than one perspective on the issue within our community. We knew we didn't want to exclude any voices from the conversation.

We convened a working group of 20 people, with former NVUSD superintendent John Glaser as facilitator. The voices included students, parents, alumni, faculty, Native American advocates, administrators, District office staff members, a board member and a faculty member from the Napa Valley College ethnic studies department.

Our charge, we agreed, was to recommend possible changes to board policies; recommend whether the Napa High School mascot should be changed and if so, what should that process look like.

We agreed that we would prefer to be unanimous in whatever our final recommendations would be, but that any member who was unable to support a consensus decision would be invited to write a minority report.

Thus prepared, we met five times over four months. Advocates for all points of view made presentations, we considered together all relevant laws and legal precedents, and spent time researching the history of the Indian mascot.

There were many interests in the room, such as honoring school pride, healing, having a voice and maintaining tradition, but one interest was common to literally everyone in the room: Respect. Respect for cultures, respect for traditions and more.

The process was moving, educational, emotional and important. And this week, it was announced that the group will recommend to the board that the NHS mascot be changed, and that new language be added to the board policy that directs that mascots be "gender-neutral, respectful of different cultural values and attitudes, and ... depict fairness, dignity and respect."

The committee engaged in a thoughtful process to reach this recommendation. While it does not reflect everyone's initial opinion at the beginning of the process, a substantial majority of the committee was able to accept the recommendation because:

A. The committee was educated and able to see all sides. This education helped the committee be open to listen, learn and become more aware of the topic.

B. The use of the NHS Indian was never intended to be offensive, and the committee came to understand that for many it is a much beloved and respected symbol.

C. Community thinking is evolving and will continue to evolve; our district and schools need to evolve as well.

D. Evaluating the current mascot through the lens of "social justice" requires going deeper; in the context of the 21st century, the Indian mascot is not acceptable to many, who consider it to be discriminatory and a misrepresentation of indigenous people and culture.

E. The committee learned and became aware of how derogatory and hurtful the mascot is to some.

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F. Respect was an important interest for everyone on the committee regardless of role or position. The current mascot is not seen by everyone as being respectful of all groups: If a mascot represents a group of people and members of that group of people are offended, it is time to change. Not everyone regards the current mascot as a symbol of pride and respect, and as an appropriate way to depict/honor/celebrate a group of people.

Where does this process go from here?

If the recommendation is approved by the board, NHS and district staff will plan the process of selecting a new mascot for the 2018-2019 school year. During the school year that starts this fall, 2017-2018, Napa High School won't have a mascot and will be doing the work of sunsetting the Indian logo and name.

The board will hear the recommendation at a study session on April 6, and will be asked to vote on the recommendation on April 20.

The committee acknowledges with compassion that the recommendation may be disappointing or painful for some people in our community. However, as a group, they sincerely believe that the recommendation is inclusive, sensitive and appropriate for this day and age.

Patrick Sweeney is superintendent of the Napa Valley Unified School District.

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