



April 21, 2021

Dear Chair Dembrow and Members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is Leilani Sabzalian, and I am here today to speak on behalf of HB 2052, the house bill that supports Native students' rights to wear regalia and other items of cultural significance such as eagle feathers, to public school events, including their graduation ceremonies. I speak as a mother of two Native children who attend Oregon public schools, as an Assistant Professor of Indigenous studies in Education, and as a Title VI/Indian Education parent committee member who has had to advocate on numerous occasions for Native students to be able to wear blankets, feathers, stoles, or other culturally significant items to graduation.

I should state that I felt conflicted about testifying today, not because I do not believe in this bill, which I wholeheartedly support, but because I do not want to give the impression that I believe the state has or should have the right to infringe on Native students' inherent sovereignty and their inherent right to express their cultural and spiritual beliefs. Inherent means these rights come from within our people; these rights stem from within our communities and cultures; they are not given or granted to us. I believe that regardless of whether this bill passes, Native students *still* have the inherent right to express their cultures and represent their nations, and that we must exercise our rights for them to remain respected and recognized, not the other way around. As the late Nisqually fishing rights activist Billy Frank Jr. has said: "*Every time we carry an eagle feather, that's sovereignty. Every time we pick berries, that's sovereignty. Every time we dig roots, that's sovereignty.*" And so in preparing to speak today, I told my own children that I support them in wearing eagle feathers and exercising their inherent rights, regardless of the outcome today.

This sounds oppositional, but I hope you understand I speak with this level of conviction and concern because I believe there is a lot at stake if we start telling ourselves as Indigenous peoples that our inherent rights are dependent on whether or not the state and its public schools recognize them. I come here, however, in good faith that you are supportive of this bill, that you understand the legal and moral reasons to support Indigenous students' rights to cultural, religious, and spiritual expression, and that you also recognize the practical need for Indigenous students to express themselves in visible ways to counter the erasure they experience as statistical minorities in public schools. I am hopeful you see why it is so important for Native students to express their honor, their pride, their achievements, and their success back to those who came before them, to those who supported them, and to those who will follow.

I would also like to address a practical concern. Indian education programs, including Title VI coordinators and parent committee members, have spent too much precious time and energy explaining, justifying, or advocating for the rights that are protected by HB 2052. Wearing regalia, blanketing, eagle feathers, and bearing witness are longstanding Native practices of community recognition, yet Native educators, parents, and students often have to spend time and energy fighting for these rights, even when they receive letters of support from high level administrators within the Oregon Department of Education. Native students in our Indian Ed

EDUCATION STUDIES

5277 University of Oregon, Eugene OR 97403-5277 T 541-346-3404 F 541-346-3556 education.uoregon.edu/edst

An equal-opportunity, affirmative-action institution committed to cultural diversity and compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act

program have been supported these past few years, but these rights are dependent on the time and relational work our program invested with high school principals and district administrators, and turnover at the district can jeopardize these rights. It was just five years ago that we had to contest a “no adornment policy” at a high school, had to explain why this isn’t a matter of equity, but sovereignty, and had to explain that policies that allow academic honors cords only, not only violate Indigenous students’ rights, but are also unjust and inequitable given Indigenous students’ disproportionate access to those very honors. This took a great deal of time and effort on the part of our program to educate administrators and teachers, and we are vulnerable once again if these administrators that we worked so hard to educate leave their positions.

I know my time is limited, but I want to end with a quote by the late Wilma Crowe, a Lakota Sioux Elder and citizen of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. Wilma has since passed, but this quote comes from when her great grandchild was about to graduate from high school. Our program was told that Native students at her great granddaughter’s high school could not wear eagle feathers or the Pendleton stoles we created for graduation. Our parent committee strongly advocated—making calls, writing FAQs, drafting a letter of support—and reached out to Wilma for guidance as to whether this was an important fight we should take up. “Of course it is important,” Wilma said, “She is not just a graduate, she is representing our Native community.” Wilma’s quote is such an important frame for this conversation: this isn’t about individual students, but about how each student is indebted to and an embodied reflection of those who came before them—their families, communities, and nations. We were successful that year, and Wilma was able to see her great grandchild graduate in a way that reflected her community and culture, but Elders like Wilma and students like her great granddaughter shouldn’t be *fortunate* to experience those moments; those moments should be *guaranteed* for Native students and their families and communities. Other Elders and families deserve to bear witness to Native youth who defy immense odds to walk across those stages and be recognized, not just as graduates, but as *Native* graduates. To witness, to be recognized, and to express oneself *as a Native* is a sovereign right.

Thank you for your time,



Leilani Sabzalian (Alutiiq)
Assistant Professor of Indigenous Studies in Education
Co-Director, Sapsik’wala Education Program
University of Oregon