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## **SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION**

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January 29, 2016

Dear Colleagues,

Across the state, spring brings great excitement about commencement ceremonies. In preparation I want to take this opportunity to address a topic of great interest to our community—tribal students wearing items of cultural significance such as eagle feathers during graduation ceremonies.

During the last few decades, many, if not most, high schools have faced the issue of whether or not to permit Native students to wear eagle feathers during graduation ceremonies. Given the tribal reverence for eagles and the high honor represented by graduation, most schools recognize that commencement ceremonies are an appropriate setting for Native students to wear an eagle feather with dignity. These schools recognize that allowing Native students to wear eagle feathers is not only good policy, but also the right thing to do.

Since time immemorial, many tribal nations have viewed eagles and their feathers as sacred elements of their cultural traditions. As a part of those traditions, eagle feathers may represent honesty, truth, strength, courage, and wisdom. As such, eagle feathers are given only in times of great honor. Many tribes present their young people with eagle feathers upon graduation from high school to signify the achievement of this important educational journey and the honor the graduate brings to his or her family, community, and tribal nation. For many Native students, receiving an eagle feather in recognition of graduation is as significant as earning the diploma or akin to an honor society stole.

Some districts have adopted policies allowing Native graduates to have this distinct honor. These policies range from specifically accommodating Native students, to permitting student organizations that represent certain cultural groups to approve and/or distribute eagle feathers for Native students. However, on occasion whether or not to permit Native students to wear an eagle feather during graduation still becomes an issue, usually because many school districts have strict dress codes about attire for commencement ceremonies so as to avoid any disruption to the ceremony.

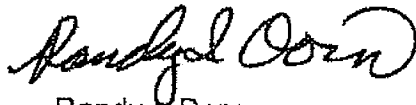
In my experience assisting school district staff resolving matters relating to Native students wearing eagle feathers during graduation ceremonies, I observe that we often came to the realization that the eagle feather is a symbol of such high honor in the tribal community, it should not be viewed as a violation of the graduation ceremony dress codes.

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Federally recognized tribes Washington state operate as sovereign nations. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) is committed to fostering the vital government-to-government relationships with tribes. OSPI fully supports policies that recognize the tribal student's ability to honor unique tribal cultures. I am calling on school districts to review current policies and search for inclusive ways Native students can honor their tribal traditions.

Thank you for supporting our state's efforts to ensure educational equity and to foster inclusive educational activities for all students and communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Randy I. Dorn". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Randy" and last name "Dorn" clearly distinguishable.

Randy I. Dorn  
State Superintendent  
of Public Instruction