

Educate Your School and District

It is critical to educate your school's administration about the religious and cultural significance of eagle feathers to Native peoples. Bring this flyer with you to meetings. Key points to raise include:

Religious Importance: Many tribal nations highly revere and hold sacred eagles and their feathers. Eagle feathers represent honesty, truth, majesty, strength, courage, wisdom, power and freedom. Native peoples believe eagles have a special connection with God as they roam the sky. Federal law and policy has long recognized this religious importance.

Ceremonial and Academic Significance: Eagle feathers are given in times of great honor. Many tribes present their people with eagle feathers upon graduation 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 is as significant as earning a diploma, and at least as significant as earning an honor society stole, which is typically permitted at graduation.

Organize a Native Student Group

Some schools permit student organizations to approve or distribute honor chords, stoles, or other regalia that students may wear at commencement (e.g. Honor Society,

Future Farmers of America). Forming a Native student organization to approve eagle feathers can ensure that your school permits wearing them at graduation. Some student groups and Indian education programs assist Native students in obtaining eagle feathers for graduation through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Advocate for Changes to District Graduation Attire Policies

You are likely not the only Native student who will request that your school allow you to wear an eagle feather at graduation, especially if your school has a sizeable Native population. Petition your school board to change its graduation attire policies to permit Native students to wear eagle feathers in a manner consistent with their individual and tribal religious beliefs and traditions. Enlist the support of your Indian education parent committee and/or Indian education program, if your school has one. For an example of a successful campaign, see these documents requesting that Grand Forks Public Schools in North Dakota change its policy:
<https://turtletalk.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/eagle-feather-packet.pdf>

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Wearing Eagle Feathers at Graduation

A Guide for Students and Families



Source: Rory Appleton, Clovis Unified says agreement reached with student to wear eagle feather at Clovis High graduation, Fresno Bee, June 2, 2015.

Every year, Native high school students across the country seek to express their individual and tribal religious beliefs and celebrate their personal academic achievements by wearing an eagle feather at their graduation ceremonies. While most public school districts permit Native students to wear eagle feathers at graduation, some school districts do not allow it. This guide provides information for students and families on steps they can take to ensure that the graduate can wear an eagle feather during the commencement ceremony. It is based on approaches we have found most successful in addressing this issue. This is intended to be an informational guide and we urge concerned graduates and parents to seek legal advice on their specific case.

Review Your School's Policy As Soon As Possible

Start early and be proactive. As soon as possible, consult your student handbook and ask your school administration about its policies, ideally at the beginning of your senior year. Sometimes school officials will say that the graduation dress code does not allow students to wear an eagle feather. If so, inquire about the school's process for requesting an exception to its policy and whether you can request a religious accommodation. The process of requesting permission and appealing an unfavorable decision can take time. Waiting until the last minute puts you at risk of not being able to wear an eagle feather.

Contact Others for Support

Your tribe and community can advocate for you. Here are some ideas of people from whom you can request letters and other support. These people can help explain why it is culturally and religiously important for Native students to be allowed to wear eagle feathers during graduation.

- Indian parent committee and/or Indian education program
- Tribal leaders and council members
- Tribal education department or agency
- Elders and other community members

Request Permission from Your School, District, and School Board

Follow Formal Procedures: Follow any formal procedures your school or district has for requesting exceptions to the graduation dress code or for religious accommodations.

Contact Principal: If your school does not have a policy regarding eagle feathers at graduation, or if the policy prohibits eagle feathers, first request permission from your principal to wear one at your commencement ceremony. If your school has a religious accommodation policy, use that to make your request.

Appeal to the Superintendent and School Board: If your principal denies your request, follow your school's appeals or grievance process, which is probably outlined in your student handbook. This process will likely include contacting your district superintendent and potentially the school board to appeal the decision.

Do Not Ignore Your School's Rule Against Eagle Feathers

Violating your school's rule can have negative consequences. Your school may ban you from participating in commencement, subject you to fines, or refuse to give you your diploma. Being proactive, starting early, and seeking support from others is a more productive approach.