

# Hinckley-Finlayson schools face blowback for banning Native drum group at graduation

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A northeastern Minnesota school district with a large Native American student population is facing blowback after its board voted unanimously this week to forbid a tribal drum group from singing at its upcoming high school graduation ceremony.

The Hinckley-Finlayson School Board voted Monday without comment not to allow the performance of an Ojibwe traveling song at the May 24 graduation, after the district's superintendent said allowing the song would create "legal risk" if community members feel it is endorsing a religious group.

The vote prompted a school walkout Tuesday afternoon, during which about 40 students left school ten minutes early and marched around the school.

Hinckley-Finlayson High School social studies teacher Alyssa Vickstrom, who's also an advisor for the school's Native American Student Association, or NASA, said they were joined by family and other community members.

"It was entirely peaceful," Vickstrom said. "And it seems like that is going to get bigger and continue to happen until graduation day."

The drum group was invited to perform at last year's graduation ceremony, and performed again at a powwow at the school last month.

Vickstrom said administration approached the Native student group about shortening the song (it's about five minutes long), and asked them to restrict audience members from coming down from the bleachers to join in the song.

"We pushed back against that and said that community members should still be welcome to back-up sing around the drum, as they would do at a powwow or at other ceremonies," Vickstrom said.

## 'Extracurricular groups'

In its recommendation to the school board, Hinckley-Finlayson administration advised against allowing any "extracurricular groups" to perform at future graduation ceremonies.

The district cited several reasons, including wanting “to avoid disruption to the ceremony with people potentially leaving the ceremony during these presentations or with people potentially coming down to the gymnasium floor to get a better view.”

School administration also said that many other extracurricular groups may ask to be a part of the graduation ceremony, and the district didn’t want to “pick and choose” which groups to include.

Superintendent Brian Masterson declined an interview request. In a statement, he said one reason for closing graduation to extracurricular group performances “was to ensure the graduation ceremony remains focused on the graduating students,” rather than the groups. The district’s attorney also advised administration “to avoid the perception that it is endorsing any religion as part of graduation, as courts have found that violates the Establishment Clause [of the Constitution].”

People who spoke at the school board meeting pointed out that several high schools and universities around the state — including several University of Minnesota campuses — already allow Native American drum songs at their graduation ceremonies.

“If there was a real legal problem, don’t you think the Attorney General, and the University of Minnesota, would have flagged this?” said Melanie Benjamin, chief executive of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, in an interview with MPR News.

The drum is an important representation of Ojibwe culture, tradition and the heritage of the region, Benjamin continued. The song the students want to perform “is to wish people a good and safe journey in life,” Benjamin said. “It’s secular. The school board to me has a really bad legal argument. And it’s shameful that our kids have to experience that.”

## **‘100 steps backwards’**

Native American people make up only about one percent of the state’s population. But Native American students make up about one quarter of Hinckley-Finlayson students, according to the most recent state data.

It’s important for those students to see themselves represented at graduation, said Niiyo Gonzalez, a parent of two Native American students at the school, and the education commissioner for the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe.

“We are one of the most invisible groups of people in our own homelands. And we’re also the group with the lowest graduation rates in this whole country and in the state of Minnesota. So I think it’s very important for us as a people to see ourselves as able to participate in and make accomplishments in the academic world,” said Gonzalez.

Teacher Alyssa Vickstrom said she was particularly disheartened by the board’s vote because she believes the district has made substantial progress with its Native student population.

Hinckley-Finlayson graduates 79 percent of its Native American students, compared to 61 percent statewide. The Native American student graduation rate in the district has risen each of the last three years. Twenty-one Native American students, including Wilson, are graduating this year.

The district introduced two Ojibwe culture classes four years ago. Vickstrom, who is not Native American but describes herself as a “white ally,” said they have waiting lists and are among the most popular classes in school.

The board’s decision, she said, “felt like 100 steps backwards. It felt like we just lost decades worth of progress in our district.”

In his statement, Masterson said the district employs an Indian education coordinator, and provides stipends to Indian education advisors. The district also adopted a smudging policy this year, which permits students “to safely participate in smudging rituals on school grounds as a showing of support for this important cultural practice.”

## **Fighting for ‘civil rights’**

The school district has offered time and space for the drum group to perform outside of graduation, either after the ceremony or on another date.

“The district is committed to work with the drum group to identify an alternate forum for the group to perform, and for their families and interested community members to attend and support them,” Masterson said.

Supporters of the students argue that’s not the same as having the drum at the graduation ceremony, where students walk across stage to receive their diplomas after more than a decade of hard work.

Graduating senior Kaiya Wilson, an officer with the school’s Native American Student Association who addressed the board Monday, said she felt “disgusted and demoralized” after their vote.

“We’re not only being denied the opportunity to showcase and celebrate our culture, but we’re being subjected to racism and discrimination at the same time.”

Wilson plans to attend the University of Minnesota in the Twin Cities in the fall to study psychology and American Indian Studies. She said she’s not giving up.

“This is definitely not over. We’re honestly not looking to be activists, because this is for justice. It’s civil rights. It’s our rights as indigenous people.”