



1/30/25

Do You Know Your Rights Cousin?

Project: To bring awareness to rights for Indigenous families regarding excused absences and to advocate in support of more excused absences for native children and youth

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Background

Religious retreats or cultural events like ceremonies have been part of the native community since time immemorial. A ceremony is a big gathering where a community culture shares, prays, dances, and eats together. Even outside of the native community, ceremonies are a part of many different cultures. They are a vital part of keeping cultural traditions alive, which is why many elders and youth alike attend them. They are a way of healing, reconnecting, and rooting ourselves. There are rules on how students can attend them if they happen during school hours like how the parents need to submit an email or call in beforehand or afterward to get an excused absence for their child.

Existing policy

As of right now, students are only allowed to have two school days of excused time for their religious or cultural practices per semester. Assembly Bill 1503 states that students between the ages of 6 and 18 are allowed to have an excused absence for a religious retreat. It also states that a parent or guardian must write a letter stating why their student is going to be absent. Some parents in the community are still oblivious to their rights to apply for an excused absence for their student in regard to ceremonies. Many families that go to ceremonies, powwows, and big times go through the process but still have the uncertainty of it not being approved by the attendance clerk or have had the experience where it did not get put into the system correctly. The latest version of the bill was

published just last year on the 13th of October and approved by the Governor on the same day.

But, do some parents really know their rights? If a student misses too much from school then their parents get questioned and warned by the school. It's important that the student doesn't get labeled as truant and gets their excused absence since that affects their record and the parents. This is why it's crucial for native parents to know their rights and how to use them. Some native parents don't even know that this bill exists. Some who do are not pleased by the lengthy process that is needed for the excuse and the amount of time given. Some parents don't even have access to a computer or device to access this information or they don't know where to find the information. Parents in my community, North Sacramento, aren't aware of this bill. Parents like these need resources like coordinators that they can talk to that can be provided by their school district or outside resource like non-profit organizations/ youth groups that focus on native youth for this important issue.

Policy Change

As a native youth in this generation, I know that this is not enough time for those of us who attend ceremonies regularly. Ceremonies were once banned from being in practice by the same government that we use today. Now that the ban is lifted, all native youth should be allowed to attend their cultural practices like ceremonies for more than just a few hours a semester. The American Psychiatric Association states, "Indigenous persons may struggle to achieve a comfortable balance between tribal traditions and the demands of contemporary life." this shows how in our modern day, indigenous people find it hard to try to find the time to attend their cultural ceremonies due to the "normal" or eurocentric rules and norms more people live by. This is why it's important for us to have the ability to attend our ceremonies without a short limit.

Many school districts in the Sacramento area, like the Twin Rivers and Sac City Unified districts, have this bill on their website for parents to refer to but is still hard to navigate to find. With high numbers of students of color in our State, it's crucial that each and every one of them are able to attend their cultural ceremonies, especially native youth due to the fact that we experience high rates of suicide, mental health problems, and overall generational trauma since European contact. Attending ceremonies is a way of healing and dealing with these issues in our own traditional way. The American Psychiatric Association found that, "If not addressed and identified accurately, depression, anxiety,

PTSD, and substance use can be outward manifestations of the intergenerational trauma and unresolved historical grief.” presently have to do whatever we can to help the native youth in this generation. Since schools work with youth this is crucial to implement into our laws.

Students should be allowed more time to attend their cultural ceremonies due to the impact that they have on the overall mental wellness and health wellness that they play into them. Students get a sense of community and belonging from being around their own people and traditions that they don’t get a lot in normal settings. They are able to make memories and learn more about their traditions and culture. This is why students should have an extended amount of time of 10 school days at minimum. Ceremonies and a connection to culture are so important in our community; it helps serve as a therapy and even prevention.

Next Steps

Policymakers are crucial to making this wish a reality. We as the people most impacted by this and our allies have to recognize the importance of this. As all important or intricate things take time, here is an idea of steps that we can take.

First, we have to get this information out. We have to educate parents on their rights. That can be done through articles like this and by posting information on school websites. The district websites all need to update and improve a section on these matters. For example, on Twin Rivers website there is a tribal portion since they provide programs and opportunities for the tribal community that is part of their schools. Even if the district doesn’t provide those programs there still needs to be an easier way to access this information without looking through a long student handbook. There can even be information papers in the office of the schools so that parents who can’t access a device can still be provided the information. Second, once we get parents and specifically native parents aware of their rights we have to start advocating for more time. Adding more time for students has many benefits including cultural connection, mental health, and overall well-being. The third thing that we need to do is advocate and work together to update the process of getting the excused absence. Could there be a simpler way of informing the principal that a student is going to be missing a day? For example, parents can fill out a form at the office or online instead of writing a formal letter. That way it’s an easier process that all parents could use.

One next step that I have taken is sharing and posting this information on different websites so that the community can access this important information. I have also shared this information with the Sacramento County Office of Education.

Help

Below is a link for a sample letter to send via email or paperback to your school administrator and/or attendance clerk that you can alter according to your circumstances.

[Sample](#)

For More Information

<https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/diversity/education/stress-and-trauma/indigenous-people>

https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB1503