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Dear County and District Superintendents, Charter School Administrators, and High School Principals:

Reminder of Graduates' Rights to Wear Tribal Regalia

As another school year comes to a close, we would like to thank you for all you do every day in support of our students, families, and staff. We know that you are in the midst of celebrating our graduates at commencement ceremonies with their families and friends, and our hope is that graduation is a time when we joyously embrace the richness of diversity of our students.

Many students will express their cultural pride and honor their heritage by wearing native or traditional clothing—and they are allowed to do so by law.*

Education Code Section 35183.1 allows students to wear **"traditional tribal regalia *or* recognized objects of cultural *or* religious significance** as an adornment at school graduation ceremonies" (emphasis added). Section 35183.1 defines "adornment" as "something attached to, or worn with, but not replacing, the cap and gown customarily worn at school graduation ceremonies." (*Ed. Code*, § 35183.1, subd. (b)(1).) "Cultural" is defined as the "recognized practices and traditions of a certain group of people." (*Id.*, subd. (b)(2).)

Per section 35183.1, a local education agency (i.e., school district, county office of education, or charter school) retains discretion and authority to prohibit such an item ***only if*** the item "is likely to cause a substantial disruption of, or material interference with, the ceremony." (*Ed. Code*, § 35183.1, subd. (a).) (emphasis added).

Graduation is a major milestone in the lives of our students, and this celebration not only encompasses their academic achievements but also the preservation and appreciation of the tapestry of our heritage. It marks a significant milestone in young people's lives and provides an opportunity to celebrate their achievements and not only the collective efforts of families, educators, and communities.

As we commemorate the dedication and accomplishments of our students, we urge you to implement policies that embrace culturally inclusive ceremonies and preserve the rights of our Native students. Let us ensure that these policies reflect and pay homage to the rich diversity present among our students and their families.

We encourage you to take the time to further review the portion of the California *Education Code* cited in this letter as well as local policies, and explore opportunities for students to honor their heritage, which is crucial for creating an inclusive and supportive environment. As policies are reviewed, the California Department of Education (CDE) and the Office of the Attorney General (AG) recommend engaging with your local tribal leaders and American Indian communities to gain a deeper understanding of their traditions and values. These meetings allow for meaningful dialogue where perspectives can be shared and considerations for how cultural practices can be incorporated into graduation ceremony policies. By collaborating in this way, educational institutions can demonstrate respect for cultural diversity and create opportunities for students to celebrate their heritage proudly.

The CDE and the AG deeply appreciate your dedication to ensuring that all students feel valued in their educational journey. We are committed to upholding our students' cultural traditions and ensuring that graduation ceremonies are inclusive and reflective of the rich diversity within our student population.

Please extend my congratulations to all of your graduates and sincere thanks from the CDE and the AG to you and your staff for all that you do.

Have a great summer!

Sincerely,

Tony Thurmond
State Superintendent of Public Instruction
California Department of Education

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