

## NEW YORK STATE



# MASCOT DEBATE

## School changes nickname to comply with state mandate

**PHILIP MARCELO**  
Associated Press

BOHEMIA — A school district in New York City’s suburbs agreed this week to change its “Thunderbirds” nickname to simply the “T-Birds” in order to comply with the state’s mandate to retire all Native American sports names and mascots.

According to the deal, Connetquot Central School District on Long Island would be allowed to continue using imagery such as an eagle, thunderbolt or lightning bolt, so long as it can attest the “T-Birds” moniker has “never been associated with any Indigenous imagery of any kind.”

But Native American advocates complain the proposed name change still falls short of the spirit of a 2023 state regulation, which districts had to comply with by the end of June.

John Kane, a member of the Mohawk tribe of upstate New York, argues there’s no other etymology for “Thunderbird” than Native American culture. The mythical creature is associated with storms and often viewed as a powerful spirit and benevolent protector in many indigenous traditions.

In more recent times, the striking moniker has been adopted as the name of a popular Ford convertible, the U.S. Air Force’s aerial demonstration team, a beloved 1960s children’s science fiction TV show, as well as numerous sports teams

across the country, such as the Springfield Thunderbirds, a minor league affiliate of NHL’s St. Louis Blues.

“Don’t ask me what the white origins of ‘Thunderbirds’ is except for the car or John Travolta’s gang in ‘Grease,’” quipped Kane, who for years has called on local schools to change offensive names and mascots.

Connetquot’s school board voted Tuesday night to approve a proposed settlement in its lawsuit challenging the state regulation.

In exchange, the district agrees to withdraw its appeal of a federal judge’s decision in March that dismissed a lawsuit brought by Connetquot and other Long Island school districts over the state mascot regulation. The school system would, however, be allowed to revert back to the “Thunderbirds” name if the state regulation is repealed or overturned, the proposal states.

Joseph Pierce, director of Native American studies at Stony Brook University on Long Island, said it remains to be seen how much the proposed new nickname actually changes the way people describe Connetquot and its teams.

“In my view, this is a case where nobody really wins,” he said. “It is a shame that people are litigating over this, rather than understanding that Native American people, imagery, and symbols, including

the Thunderbird, are not theirs to use.”

The Connetquot school district didn’t respond to requests for comment Thursday.

The state education department declined to comment, citing the ongoing litigation.

The U.S. Department of Education, which under President Donald Trump has opposed efforts to erase Native American names and imagery from sports teams, also declined to weigh in, citing an investigation it launched in July into the Connetquot district’s handling of the matter.

Earlier, it had determined New York’s mascot ban was discriminatory and violated Title VI of the federal civil rights law because it still permitted the use of names and imagery derived from other racial or ethnic groups, such as the “Dutchmen” and the “Huguenots.”

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon announced that finding — and called on New York to rescind its ban — during a visit to Massapequa, another Long Island town that refuses to stop calling its sports teams the Chiefs.

Massapequa’s board of education, in a statement Thursday, called Connetquot’s name change efforts “deeply disappointing” as it vowed to “never back down” from its own efforts to preserve its Native American headaddress-wearing “Chiefs” logo.

## CRIME

# Colorado man admits threatening to kill Cayuga County resident

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A Colorado man faces up to five years in prison after admitting he sent text messages in which he threatened to kill a Cayuga County resident.

Jerry Gordon, 56, pleaded guilty to four counts of making a threat using interstate communications. The charges followed his arrest at Newark Liberty International Airport in April.

According to court documents, Gordon sent four text messages to a victim who is

identified by the initials “J.W.” In the first message, Gordon texted, “Your life is in danger. Please have your legal paperwork and other documentation wrapped up and prepared by 5:00 p.m. EST, Friday April 25, 2025.”

The next day, Gordon sent another text message: “I will ensure you look into my eyes before the final act....that is howe (sic) it is most appealing to me...there is something about when the spark leaves the eyes and then they fog out and glaze over and go dark. There is a short moment that it can

be seen. It’s beautiful.”

On April 24, Gordon texted the victim again and reminded them to “take care of any necessary paperwork and have it wrapped up by the end of tomorrow. I have a packed schedule with several of you to visit. However, I am prioritizing our interaction first....because you are so special. Plus this way if it gets to be too much fun with law enforcement...I want to make sure at least you have been taken care of.”

Gordon was arrested by the FBI on April 25. That day, he sent another text

message to the victim. “Hey Fur Face,” he wrote, “I just let Cayuga County Sheriff Brian Schenck know that I am going to drink your blood from the chalice that I will make out of your heart. I told him I would let him know where your body will be located as i have no use for it...unless I had a little ketchup or AI sauce.”

At the time of his arrest, Gordon — a former Cayuga County resident — was traveling from Colorado to Syracuse.

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