

NEWS

North Kitsap School District reverses decision to cancel Native American Graduation Honoring

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Kitsap Sun

Published 6:00 a.m. PT April 23, 2023 | Updated 5:43 p.m. PT April 24, 2023

**NORTH KITSAP**
SCHOOL DISTRICT

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A week after North Kitsap School District Superintendent Dr. Laurynn Evans said the school district would cancel its Native American Graduation Honoring due to financial loss, the district withdrew the decision and announced that it will host the graduation event at the district's Student Support Center on June 21.

But the announcement and subsequent reversal was just part of the frustration aired by several communities in North Kitsap in the week since the superintendent's statement in the Government-to-Government meeting with the Suquamish Tribe on April 13.

Disagreement over description of graduation ceremony as a 'party'

According to several community members who attended the NKSD school board meeting and a video recording provided to Kitsap Sun, Dr. Evans said, when explaining NKSD's decision to cancel the Native American Graduation Honoring, that continuing to host the event was not financially sustainable for the district. The superintendent said that before the meeting she had to sign the non-renewal letters for teachers that weren't being renewed for next year because of a budget deficit, and it was difficult for her to turn around and sign the budget requisition for a "party."

In the meeting, Evans apologized for referring to the graduation honoring as a "party" after being corrected immediately. However, the statement hurt the tribal community as well as other community members who attended the meeting and witnessed the conversation, several participants told the Kitsap Sun.

Rachael Reese, who identified herself as a parent and ally of the Latino community, attended the meeting in person. Reese described the discussion as painful to watch.

"During the meeting, they were harmed. The racism that took place by discrediting this event and demeaning this event to call it a party was very hurtful," Reese said.

Reese said the Latino community she's involved with was shocked at the "egregiousness" that was taking place in the meeting and that solidarity among community members was felt in the room.

The conversation occurred during the school district's Government to Government meeting with the Suquamish Tribe, which was listed on the school board meeting agenda and was hosted via Zoom and in the district's office in Poulsbo on April 13.

The video clip provided to Kitsap Sun was recorded by an online participant and showed footage of part of the meeting with automated captions on the screen, but no sound. The district said it does not record its Zoom meetings of the school board, in response to the Kitsap Sun requesting the full video. Meeting minutes will be available after approval by the board, NKSD said.

Nearly a week after the meeting when Evans made the statement about the graduation event, Gwen Lyon, NKSD's Executive Director of Teaching and Learning, told an [Inter-Tribal Parent Education Committee](#) (ITPEC) on April 19 that the district will host the

Native American Graduation Honoring. Lyon didn't explain why the district changed its decision and declined to comment on the issue after the ITPEC meeting.

The school district on Thursday confirmed its plan to host the Native American Graduation Honoring and said the event will be at the Student Support Center at 1 p.m. on June 21.

"We have had to grapple with a number of difficult decisions while facing the challenge of budget reductions in this budget development season," said NKSD spokesperson Jenn Markaryan in a statement to the Kitsap Sun.

"During our meetings with the Port Gamble S'Klallam and Suquamish tribes, we listened carefully and appreciated hearing the importance of the tradition and significance of honoring all of the Native American students in our school community. We are deeply grateful for the offer of support by the tribes to continue this important tradition," the spokesperson said.

When asked on Thursday about the estimated cost to the school district of the graduation honoring, a week after Evans' comment that cited financial impact, the district declined to provide a number.

On Friday NKSD posted the school board agenda for April 27, which included a statement that estimates a 6-7 percent budget reduction is being discussed.

Honor the success of Native American students

The Native American Graduation Honoring is a long-standing tradition of the NKSD's Indian Education Program, planned in cooperation with the Suquamish and the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribes (PGST), according to the Suquamish Tribe.

This honoring gives the district a chance to bring recognition to students from the highest level because it means something that PGST has witnessed and achieved so much improvement over the years, PGST Executive Director Kelly Sullivan said.

"These events help bridge us so that it's not a tribal thing or a district thing; these are OUR students together," Sullivan said in a statement.

The Suquamish Tribe is relieved to hear NKSD's reconsideration to host the event, the tribe said in a statement.

"We disagreed with the district's proposal to cancel the ceremony due to budget challenges," the Suquamish Tribe said. "We are relieved to hear that NKSD has reconsidered and will be hosting the event this year that honors the success of our tribal

students and supports the government-to-government relationship between the district and the tribes."

PGST also expressed appreciation that the ceremony will occur, Sullivan said.

"PGST is happy that the District has reconsidered the honoring ceremony, especially to honor those Native American students who are away from their homelands and don't have a local tribe to celebrate their accomplishments," Sullivan said.

Public comment rules in NKSD meetings questioned

Also drawing frustration among various communities in North Kitsap were the school district's rules for public comments during school board meetings, which came to a head at the April 13 meeting.

As stated on the district's website, the school board sets aside a maximum of 30 minutes for public comments each meeting. People who want to offer public comments in the meeting must sign up in advance by filling out an online form.

The form is open between 4:30 p.m. and 4:55 p.m. on the day of the meeting, which is five minutes before the meeting starts at 5 p.m. One individual is allowed to speak at a time. The person who signs up is the one who speaks and no one can give their minutes to another speaker, according to the district.

Some participants of the board meeting on April 13 said the public comment session where closed after four speakers who had signed up finished their comments, using less than 30 minutes to ask for the district to address the over 77 [allegations of discrimination](#) against Latino students and families in the district and respond to questions about the cancelation of the graduation honoring ceremony.

More: [Parents plan to continue discussing discrimination, lack of resources at North Kitsap schools](#)

When several attendees asked to speak to provide additional comments, they confirmed to the Kitsap Sun they were told that the district would call 911 on the speakers.

"It's a threatening environment to be in," Reese recalled the public comment session. The rules create barriers for working-class families who couldn't fill out the form during the timeframe, Reese added.

The school district said that using an online form allows both virtual and in-person attendees to sign up for public comment at the same time on one form. The rule ensures that the same opportunity for public comment was given no matter how people attend the meeting, the district said.

More:[Latino parent group presents steps toward safety, inclusion in schools](#)

An iPad is set up in the boardroom for in-person attendees to sign up, Markaryan said. The district opens the online form at 4:30 p.m. so that it coincides with when the doors open to the boardroom. The form closes at 4:55 p.m. to ensure the district has the list reviewed and ready for public comment, Markaryan said.

School staff is available in-person to assist with the sign up and the board accepts written public comment until 2 p.m. the day of a board meeting for anyone who cannot attend, or would prefer to submit comments in writing, the spokesperson said.

"Having a specific time on the agenda for public comment, along with clear guidelines, ensures that we are in compliance with the Open Public Meetings Act," Markaryan said.