



WEARING EAGLE FEATHERS AT GRADUATION

A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

Many Native American students seek to express their religious beliefs and celebrate their academic achievements by wearing an eagle feather at their graduation ceremonies. While most public school districts permit Native students to wear eagle feathers, some do not. This guide shares steps to ensure that high school graduates can wear eagle feather during their commencement ceremony. We urge concerned families to seek legal advice on their specific case.

- 1 REVIEW POLICY EARLY.** Consult handbooks and school administrators about your school's policies. Ask how to get an exception or religious accommodation if needed. Requesting permission and appealing unfavorable decisions can take time, so start early.
- 2 REQUEST PERMISSION.** Follow procedures for requesting exceptions or religious accommodations to the graduation dress code. If your school doesn't have an eagle feather policy or prohibits eagle feathers, request permission from your principal. If your school has a religious accommodation policy, use it to make your request. If your request is denied, follow your school's appeal or grievance process, which is probably in your student handbook. This may include appealing to your district superintendent or school board.
- 3 ORGANIZE A NATIVE STUDENT GROUP.** Some schools permit student organizations (e.g. Honor Society, Future Farmers of America) to approve or distribute graduation regalia. Forming a Native student group may mean your school will permit eagle feathers at graduation.
- 4 DO NOT IGNORE RULES AGAINST EAGLE FEATHERS.** Violating school rules can have negative consequences. Your school may ban you from participating in commencement, subject you to fines, or refuse to give you your diploma.
- 5 EDUCATE YOUR SCHOOL AND DISTRICT.** It is critical to educate your school administration about the religious and cultural significance of eagle feathers. Bring this flyer with you and raise the points in the right hand column.
- 6 GATHER SUPPORT.** Request letters and support from Indian education parent committees or program administrators, tribal leaders or education departments, or elders and other community members. They can advocate for you and help explain why it is culturally and religiously important for Native students to wear eagle feathers during graduation.
- 7 ADVOCATE FOR POLICY CHANGES.** You are likely not the only student to request to wear an eagle feather at graduation, especially if there is a sizeable Native population. Petition your school board to change graduation policies to permit Native students to wear eagle feathers in line with their religious beliefs and traditions.

EAGLE FEATHERS ARE RELIGIOUSLY

IMPORTANT: Many Tribal Nations hold eagles and their feathers sacred. Highly revered, eagle feathers represent honesty, truth, majesty, strength, courage, wisdom, power, and freedom. Federal law and policy has long-recognized this religious importance.

EAGLE FEATHERS CARRY

SIGNIFICANCE: Eagle feathers are given in times of great honor. Many Tribes present eagle feathers upon graduation to recognize this educational milestone and reflect the honor the graduate brings to their family, community, and Tribal Nation. For many Native students, receiving an eagle feather is as significant as earning a diploma or an honor society stole, which typically are permitted at graduation.

IT'S THE LAW: The U.S. Constitution protects Native American religious and free speech rights. Currently, state laws in AK, AZ, CA, CO, IL, KS, MN, MS, MT, NE, NV, ND, OK, OR, SD, UT, and WA also protect Native students' rights to wear eagle feathers and other tribal regalia at graduation.

Even if a policy applies to all students, uneven enforcement can constitute a violation of a Native student's religious and free speech rights. Disallowing eagle feathers, while allowing or tolerating secular or other religions' decorations, messages, or regalia at graduation can transform a "generally applicable" policy into a selective policy that discriminates based on religion, in violation of the Constitution.

VISIT [NARF.ORG/RESOURCES/GRADUATION/](https://www.narf.org/resources/graduation/) FOR MORE INFO.