# San Diego Unified moves to change Clairemont High mascot amid new transparent naming rules



The San Diego Unified School District is moving forward with plans to change Clairemont High School’s mascot, a process poised to be the first under newly proposed naming procedures aimed at enhancing transparency and community involvement. The school’s current mascot, the Chieftains, is among those prohibited by a recently enacted state law banning derogatory Native American terms in public school names and mascots.

San Diego Unified Board President Cody Petterson emphasised the legal requirement for the change, stating, “It’s literally one of the names listed as prohibited.” The district’s Indian Education Program had urged the mascot’s replacement in a letter last month, citing concerns that the Chieftains mascot has perpetuated anti-Indigenous racism through stereotypical imagery and portrayals promoted by the school over decades.

The district’s proposed new rules, expected to be voted on by the board, represent a comprehensive overhaul of the naming process for schools and their facilities. These changes come in response to previous controversies over renaming and concerns about compliance with state transparency laws. The proposal specifies that acceptable namesakes must be individuals or institutions with notable contributions to the school community or broader significance, or alternatively, the geographical area of the school.

The new policy envisions a community-driven process involving a naming committee composed of no more than ten members, including educators, students, community representatives, and district officials. Specifically, the committee would include a district employee knowledgeable about equity, the school’s board member, a district administrator supporting the principal, two student ambassadors, two community members, the school principal, and up to two staff members.

Before initiating any naming change, schools and their communities are to deliberate on factors such as costs and guiding principles centred on equity, belonging, and community empowerment. Any proposal must be accompanied by a statement justifying the need for change.

Community engagement is a key component under the proposed regulations. Schools must conduct at least two public hearings and solicit input through electronic or paper surveys or signature collection. The process requires gathering feedback on questions and concerns, suggestions for new names, and information on respondents’ connections to the school. Importantly, at least 10% of survey or signature participants must be district residents within the community served by the school, with participant addresses verified accordingly.

During public hearings, the timeline and procedural steps must be displayed, and the anonymised survey or signature results shared. Attendee names and addresses will also be collected to ensure the 10% participation threshold is met. Following this, the naming committee will consider all input and relevant information to recommend a new name exclusively to the school board. Should the board reject the recommendation, the school must re-engage the community with the process restarting. The district will limit renaming efforts to one per school year.

At Clairemont High, Principal Karly Johnstone acknowledged ongoing discussions about changing the mascot, noting that such conversations began prior to the passing of Assembly Bill 3074, which prohibits public schools, except tribal institutions, from using derogatory Native American terms in their names or mascots starting July 2026. The law explicitly lists terms including Chieftains among those banned.

Johnstone highlighted the balance the school is striving to maintain, saying, “We can understand that this is a change that could be upsetting for some of them, and we’ll be there to listen. At the same time, we are respecting the stance taken by our local tribes and tribal members and their support of the Assembly bill in order to move forward with the change.”

San Diego Unified Board member Sabrina Bazzo, whose district includes Clairemont High, expressed a commitment to ensuring student voices are integral to the process. “We want to do it right,” she said, acknowledging that while she had not heard prior complaints about the mascot, she was aware of discussions.

Johnstone reiterated the careful approach the school intends to take: “It’s a decision that we will not take lightly. We are just going to take our time to ensure that we’ve considered many different things, to ensure that we make a decision that is going to represent our school well.”

The move to revise the district’s naming procedures follows scrutiny over the renaming of the former Henry Clay Elementary School, which was renamed after local education leader Bertha Pendleton. Some parents and trustees criticised the previous process as lacking in transparency and clarity; the renaming committee’s membership was undisclosed and its meetings held behind closed doors. Questions arose about whether the committee was subject to California’s Brown Act, which mandates public transparency for certain governmental bodies. At the time, a district spokesperson stated to The San Diego Union-Tribune that the committee was exempt because it was a staff-level advisory group directed by the superintendent rather than the school board. However, trustees countered that the committee’s board mandate required it to comply with the Brown Act. Trustee Sharon Whitehurst-Payne commented, “We need to discuss it openly, because we don’t want a Brown Act violation. We need a process that’s transparent to all of us.”

The proposed updated naming policy aims to address these transparency concerns through stringent community engagement and clear procedural guidelines, supporting an equitable and community-centred approach to school naming decisions within the district.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.cbs8.com/article/news/local/state-bill-to-stop-use-of-native-american-school-mascots/509-0b96d4a7-8e49-4cb2-acdf-f0fce7e9e15b> - This URL supports the claim about the state law banning derogatory Native American terms in public school names and mascots, which includes terms like 'Chieftains.'
2. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clairemont_High_School> - This Wikipedia page corroborates that Clairemont High School's current mascot is the Chieftains and provides general information about the school.
3. <https://clairemont.sandiegounified.org/> - This is the official website of Clairemont High School, which could provide background information on the school's activities and announcements.
4. <https://clairemont.sandiegounified.org/cms/One.aspx?portalId=27836489&pageId=31343353> - This URL is a news section of Clairemont High School's website, which could contain updates or announcements relevant to school activities.
5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-4qFuiqg-c> - This YouTube video discusses the potential need for schools like Clairemont High to change their mascots in light of new legislation regarding Native American terms.
6. <https://www.sandiegounified.org/about/school-board> - This San Diego Unified School District page provides information about the school board and its members, which could be relevant to discussions about school naming policies and transparency.
7. <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/2025/04/27/san-diego-unified-could-overhaul-how-it-renames-schools-and-mascots-to-some-the-effort-is-overdue/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data