

More Schools Replace Columbus Day With Indigenous Peoples Day

By Jackie Zubrzycki Oct. 10, 2016

The second Monday in October is Columbus Day—a federal holiday since the 1930s that commemorates Christopher Columbus' four voyages from Spain to the Americas.

But in more school districts, cities, and states, Columbus Day is being replaced by Indigenous Peoples Day, a holiday commemorating Native American people and culture.

The [Rochester](#), [Plattsburgh](#), and [Niagara-Wheatfield](#) school districts in New York and [Amherst](#) schools in Massachusetts are among the districts where school boards voted to change the celebration this year. They're following the lead of school districts like [Seattle](#), which began celebrating Indigenous Peoples Day in 2014.

Columbus' role in history and history classrooms has long been controversial. In 1992, the 500th anniversary of one of Columbus' voyages, [Education Week reported on the tension that social studies teachers felt](#) as they strove to acknowledge the historical significance of Columbus' voyages and the devastating impact of colonialism on the civilizations and people who were in America before his arrival.

The move to celebrate indigenous peoples' history, and clarify the role of Christopher Columbus, started at a United Nations Conference in 1977 and was later taken up by activists in state and city governments. The City of Berkeley declared Indigenous Peoples Day in 1992, the 500th anniversary of one of Columbus' voyages. Since then, other governments have followed suit. This year alone, several cities and states, including Denver, Phoenix, Vermont, and Alaska, have also started marking Indigenous Peoples Day.

Students have led the charge in several cities: In Plattsburgh, students [presented a case for Indigenous Peoples Day to the school board](#) after a history project on the role of Columbus. (This is also an example of a growing trend toward [inquiry-based education](#) that aims to tie students' education to their world outside of the classroom.) In some places, efforts to change the holiday have attracted pushback. In Omaha, the [World-Herald reports that some Italian Americans oppose getting rid of a holiday](#) they say celebrates the American spirit of exploration and sacrifice and the contributions of Italian Americans.

Leo Killsback, an assistant professor of American Indian Studies at Arizona State University and a citizen of the Northern Cheyenne Nation, [told CNN](#) that the new

holiday "acknowledges that indigenous peoples and their voices are important in today's conversations."

The wave of districts, cities, and states switching from Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day comes as a standoff between a coalition of Native Americans and the federal government over an oil pipeline in North Dakota has brought the [contemporary issues facing Native Americans and their historical context into the national spotlight](#).

The Bureau of Indian Education is also in the midst of a reorganization after being called out for [failing to run quality schools](#).

Outside of Columbus Day, more states are looking at how to engage Native American students and incorporate their history and culture in schools. The [High Country News](#) recently reported on a new effort to bring culturally relevant education to Native American students in New Mexico. Washington State and Montana are also home to statewide efforts to teach the [history of Native Americans in public schools](#).

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