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What to do about traditional, RELIGIOUS, PERSONAL ITEMS

The start of May signals the start of graduation season. High school students across the country are about to be recognized for their achievements and cross the stage to accept their diplomas and complete a formative chapter of their lives.

While this occasion is a happy time for students and their families, attire rules and regulations can seem like an obstacle to self-expression to some students, as was discussed by the Gallup-McKinley County Schools Board of Education during their April 29 meeting.

Dist. 1 member Kevin Mitchell spoke about graduation attire to the rest of the board.

“Every year, graduation happens and at the end of it, we always end up with complaints from students and parents about students wearing their traditional clothing and jewelry, and are told they cannot show it,” he said.

Mitchell suggested that the district implement a policy wherein they discuss what can and

cannot be worn by students during graduation in regards to any ethnic clothing or effects.

Dist. 3 member Priscilla Manuelito said she receives some of the same complaints given by Mitchell, and that students do want to wear things that are important to them.

“Each [piece] of their jewelry has significance, it’s who we are,” she said. “There’s so much story behind what we have.”

Manuelito said that one issue is the number of graduation leis that students wear prior to the ceremony, which distracts from the jewelry they may be wearing. She said if the dress code tells parents and students to wait until after the ceremony to put on leis, it could alleviate some of the issues.

“We would really like to see them not covered up with all the stuff like leis,” she said.

Instead of a district wide code, Board Vice President Chris Mortensen said that it would be better to let the individual school principals decide what can be worn at their ceremonies, because they can best feel the pulse of the students at their schools.

“They’re more than capable of deciding [what students can wear],” he said. “This is something I don’t feel right micromanaging.”

Mortensen drew a comparison to Manuelito’s comments about leis and how they are not appropriate, while other accessories are. He added that the subjective views on what is appropriate is why the local principals should be able to control graduation attire on their own.

“If a kid wants to dress one way or the other, whatever the principal says is fine with me,” he said.

Mitchell does not see the solution as micromanaging, however.

“All the young men and women dressed up, they are showing their gowns, because they’re proud,” he said. “The students should be able to wear what they want to show, what they are proud of.”

He added that complaints from numerous schools about what other schools in the district allow their students to wear, is a frequent occurrence after graduation.

Manuelito wanted to emphasize that this matter is mostly about allowing indigenous students to wear traditional garb, and showing how the community is multicultural.

“We’re all unique, [our traditional attire] make[s] us unique,” she said.

She added that any limitations being placed on what the students can or can’t wear hurts them.

“They deserve to [celebrate],” she said. “They have that one way to dress and show a bit of themselves.”

GMCS Superintendent Mike Hyatt gave a few comments on the matter, stating he understands both sides of the issue.

“I want to caution if the board is going to involve themselves, that they be ready to be extremely specific about what the policy states,” he said. “The student can interpret what is appropriate for them. Something a student decides is religious to them could be inappropriate to [the board].”

One parent who came forward during the public comment session to speak on the matter was Andrea Thomas, of Tohatchi. She read a letter from her daughter to the board about how she

feels about the limitations and dress code.

“Wearing what I want to wear and show who I am [is important on graduation],” Thomas read to the board. “This will let the rural schools feel like we are all one.”

The item was for discussion, only. No formal action was taken.

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