



MARY FELZKOWSKI

STATE SENATOR • 12TH SENATE DISTRICT

Testimony for SB 85, 86, 87, 88, and 89

Senator Mary Felzkowski

Committee on Government Operations, Labor and Economic Development

March 12, 2025

Good morning, Chairman Feyen and Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bills 85, 86, 87, 88, and 89. This past summer and fall I served as the vice-chair of the Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations, during which time I had the pleasure of working with tribal members and legislators from throughout our great State. The outcome of this committee are these five commonsense bills that are before you today.

Senate Bill 85 provides that a school board or charter school cannot prohibit a pupil with tribal affiliation from wearing traditional tribal regalia at a graduation ceremony or school-sponsored event. It was requested by tribal members to ensure all tribal-affiliated students are able to wear tribal regalia at graduation ceremonies. Last session, in the Assembly the bill passed unanimously out of committee and the entire body on a voice vote, but did not receive a hearing in the Senate. This interim, the tribal committee members reemphasized that the ability to wear regalia at graduation ceremonies was an ongoing problem for their members, so the committee again recommended the bill for introduction.

Senate Bill 86 adds tribal governments and their employees to the list of persons who are authorized to copy a certified copy of a vital record (such as a birth certificate) for administrative use by the authorized entity. Currently, the list of entities that are authorized to make these copies include financial institutions, state agencies, county departments, and their employees. Making an unauthorized copy is a Class I felony, punishable by a fine up to \$10,000, prison for up to three and a half years, or both. Last session, in the Assembly the bill passed unanimously out of committee and the entire body on a voice vote, and in the Senate passed out of committee but no further action was taken. Tribal members reiterated that their government employees need to retain copies of vital records to establish and verify membership, so the committee recommended the bill for introduction again.

Senate Bill 87 provides an option for a tribal government to determine whether a person licensed to teach an American Indian language is qualified to receive a lifetime teaching license. Currently, when an individual applies for a Tier II (three-year provisional) license to teach an American Indian Language in an American Indian Language Program, the applicant must be certified as competent in the given language by the applicable tribal council, tribal language division, or local American Indian parent advisory committee. There is no additional certification of competence requirement for applicants of a Tier III lifetime license to teach an American Indian Language in an American Indian Language Program.

The bill allows tribal governments to opt in to review applicants for Tier III lifetime licenses for an American Indian language associated with that tribe or band. Once opted in, DPI would notify the tribe or band whenever an applicant applies for a Tier III license in a language associated with the tribal government. The tribal government would then determine and notify DPI whether the applicant is highly skilled and endorse the applicant receiving a Tier III lifetime license, or whether the applicant is not highly skilled and should instead

retain a Tier II license. This additional certification does not change any of the other requirements already necessary to obtain a Tier III license.

Last session, in the Assembly this bill passed unanimously out of committee and the entire body on a voice vote, but did not receive a hearing in the Senate. This interim, committee members asked the bill to be reintroduced again this session.

Senate Bill 88 allows any tribal school teacher to serve on the Professional Standards Council for Teachers. Under current law, one of the members of the Professional Standards Council for Teachers, which advises the State Superintendent, must be a licensed teacher employed at a tribal school and recommended by a federally recognized American Indian tribe or band in this state with a tribal school. Under the bill, this member would not need to be licensed by DPI, but would still need to be a teacher employed at a tribal school. DPI requested this change as the position has been vacant for some time, due to the fact that teachers at tribal schools do not need a DPI license. This is the first session this bill has been considered by the Committee on State-Tribal Relations.

Senate Bill 89 requires that school districts include in their annual report to DPI the numbers, ages, and tribal affiliation of American Indian children attending the school district beginning in the 2026-2027 school year. Currently, school districts are required to report various information annually to DPI, including demographic information about its pupils. Also, DPI must make an annual assessment of the needs and evaluation of resources for the American Indian Language and Culture Education Program. DPI has requested school district report information relating to the numbers, ages, and tribal affiliation of American Indian children attending the school district, but currently such reporting is only voluntary, so not all school districts report this information. This bill makes that reporting required. Last session, the bill was voted out of committee but was not voted on by the entire Assembly, and did not receive a hearing in the Senate.

I want to thank Chair Mursau for his work on the Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations. Steve McCarthy and Abby Gorzlaneyk from Legislative Council are here with me today to help answer any questions. Thank you for considering these bills.



Jeff Mursau

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 36TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

SENATE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS, LABOR AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT Senate Bills 85, 86, 87, 88, 89

March 12, 2025

Good morning, members of the Senate Committee on Government Operations, Labor and Economic Development. During this past interim, I again served as the chairperson of the Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations.

The State-Tribal Relations committee is a permanent committee created to study issues relating to American Indian tribes and to develop legislative proposals. Membership of the study committee consisted of two Senators, four Representatives, and 11 public members representing the interests of the state's tribes. The study committee met four times from August to December 2024.

The committee discussed numerous topics of importance to the state's tribes. In concluding its work, the committee recommended five bill drafts for introduction by the Joint Legislative Council, all of which are before this committee today.

Senate Bill 85 provides that school boards and charter schools may not prohibit a pupil with certain tribal affiliation from wearing traditional tribal regalia at a graduation ceremony or school-sponsored event.

Senate Bill 86 adds tribal governments and their employees to the list of persons who are authorized to copy a certified copy of a vital record for administrative use by the authorized entity.

Senate Bill 87 provides an option for a tribe to determine whether a person licensed to teach an American Indian language is qualified to receive a lifetime teaching license.

Senate Bill 88 allow any tribal school teacher to serve on the Professional Standards Council for Teachers.

Senate Bill 89 requires that school districts include in their annual report to DPI the numbers, ages, and tribal affiliation of American Indian children attending the school district beginning in the 2026-2027 school year.

All of these bills were recommended for introduction by State-Tribal Relations committee and Joint Legislative Council by unanimous votes.

Steve McCarthy and Abby Gorzlancyk from Legislative Council are here with me today to help answer any questions. Thank you for considering this bill.



Oneida Nation
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To: Senator Dan Feyen, Chair
Members of the Senate Committee on Operations, Labor & Economic Development

From: Lisa Liggins, Oneida Nation Tribal Secretary

Date: Wednesday, March 12, 2025

Re: Support for Senate Bill 85: Tribal Regalia Bill Recommended by the Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations

Shekoli Chair Feyen and members of the Senate Committee.

My name is Lisa Liggins, I serve as Tribal Secretary, an elected office of the Oneida Nation. I also served on the State of Wisconsin Joint Legislative Council Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations.

I would first like to thank the Committee Chair for scheduling a public hearing on this bill recommended by the Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations. I would also like to thank Representative Jeff Mursau, who chaired the Special Committee and the other legislators that served: State Senators Felzkowski (Vice-Chair) and Smith; and, Assembly Representatives Conley, Edming, and Rozar.

To provide some background, I was a member of the Oneida Nation School Board, and I now act as the liaison to the School Board while also serving on the Oneida Youth Leadership Institute Board. Additionally, I am a member of the State of Wisconsin Joint Legislative Council's Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations.

The Oneida Nation has over 17,000 tribal citizens worldwide, with more than 1,400 students attending public schools in Wisconsin. Like many Tribal Nations in the state, our Nation's jurisdiction overlaps with multiple governmental entities, including two counties, five cities and villages, and six school districts.

Wisconsin law provides critical protections for students based on their religious beliefs, ancestry, creed, race, and national origin. Schools are required to reasonably accommodate students' religious beliefs and ensure that no student is denied participation or benefits in curricular and extracurricular activities due to these protected characteristics. However, current law does not explicitly affirm the right of American Indian students to wear traditional tribal regalia at significant events such as graduation ceremonies.

For Native American students, graduation is not just an academic milestone—it is a moment of deep cultural, spiritual, and personal significance. Many Native students and their families honor this achievement by wearing traditional tribal regalia, which carries profound historical and

sacred meaning. They are not mere accessories but are expressions of cultural identity and accomplishment.

One of the most sacred elements of our regalia is the eagle feather, which represents the purity and innocence of the mind, body, and spirit. It is often worn as a mark of identity and great achievement. The eagle, as the leader of all birds, has been a powerful messenger since the beginning of time, flying closest to the Creator and carrying our words and thoughts on its wings. During the formation of the Great Law, the governing law of the Lotinuhsyuni, the Iroquois Confederacy, the Creator placed an eagle at the top of the Tree of Peace, tasking it with the responsibility to watch over and protect our peace.

We deeply value the eagle's presence and its feathers. In our traditions, men wear immature eagle feathers in their kastowe (Oneida headdress), while women wear the plumes. These feathers are gifted in recognition of success and serve as a reminder to uphold the purity and innocence of the mind, body, and spirit—to maintain a peaceful mind as the Creator intended. The eagle is one of nature's helpers, guiding us to keep a good mindset and live in harmony. Eagle feathers are integral to our ceremonies, our headdresses, and our symbols of great accomplishment.

Denying Native students the right to wear their regalia and feathers at graduation or other school-sponsored events is not just a restriction on self-expression—it disregards our cultural and religious freedoms. While some Wisconsin school districts already allow tribal regalia, inconsistencies in policy have led to confusion, conflict, and, in some cases, the exclusion of Native students from fully participating in one of the most significant moments of their lives.

By explicitly protecting the right of American Indian students to wear traditional tribal regalia at graduation and other school-sponsored events, Wisconsin will join a growing number of states that recognize and respect this fundamental aspect of Native identity. Ensuring this protection in law would reinforce the state's commitment to inclusivity, equality, and respect for the sovereignty of Tribal Nations.

The Oneida Nation respectfully urges this committee and the Legislature to support clear protections that allow American Indian students to proudly wear their traditional regalia as a symbol of their achievements and cultural heritage. It is with a good mind, a good heart, and strong fire I say yawako for your time and consideration.