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Saskatchewan school officials backtrack after banning 'Got Land? Thank an Indian' hoodie

NP ABIGALE SUBDHAN | January 15, 2014 | Last Updated: Jan 15 6:19 PMET
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Balcarres, Sask., Grade 8 student Tenelle Starr and member of the nearby Star Blanket First Nation was told not to wear a sweatshirt in school that has the words "Got Land? Thank an Indian" on it, although officials have since relented

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Saskatchewan school officials are backtracking on a decision to ban a First Nations student from wearing an Aboriginal land rights hoodie to school.

Tenelle Starr, 13, told CBC News that teachers asked her not to wear the sweatshirt to school because other students were uncomfortable with its message. The hoodie read "Got land?" on the front and "Thank an Indian" on the back.

"They told me to remove my sweater because it was offending other people," the eighth grader at Balcarres Community School, which is about 90 km outside of Regina, told CBC.



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“[The school board] communicated further with local First Nations representatives and felt that the slogan on the shirt clearly was meant to provide the community with a message,” Ben Grebinski, director of education for the Prairie Valley School Division said after the decision was repealed. “It was not intended to be offensive.”



The sweater had the words "Got land?" on the front and "Ask an Indian" on the back

CBC News

One teacher reportedly told Starr that people saw the message as “racist” and she was asked to wear the hoodie inside out instead.

Mr. Grebinski said that parents and other community members heard about the story and called the school to complain about the sweater.

“It was done to be respectful of those individuals that felt the slogan on the shirt may have been offensive. It was a way of maintaining harmony within a community.”

But Starr felt differently about the situation.

“We were taught Indians were on this land first, so why are people offended?” Starr told CBC.

Starr is a member of the Star Blanket Cree reserve, located just outside Balcarres, Sask. The Star Blanket Cree Nation is one of the bands covered by Treaty 4, one of 11 numbered treaties signed between Canadian Aboriginals and the monarchy.

Treaty 4 represents land that covers most of southern Saskatchewan, as well as parts of west Manitoba and southeast Alberta. The treaty, which was signed on Sept. 15, 1874, allowed Europeans to settle on historically Aboriginal land.

After Tuesday’s consultation between school officials and First Nation community leaders, the school changed their mind and said that the hoodie’s message was acceptable.

“I wear it proudly around the school,” Starr said.

Sheldon Poitras, a council member for Star Blanket First Nation and a spokesperson for Ms. Starr’s family, said that he is pleased with the outcome of the incident.



A Facebook image of Starr wearing the disputed sweater

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“There were just some communication issues that needed to be taken care of about [Ms. Starr's] goal for awareness for the treaties,” he said. “Once we all got on the same page, everything was fine.”

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