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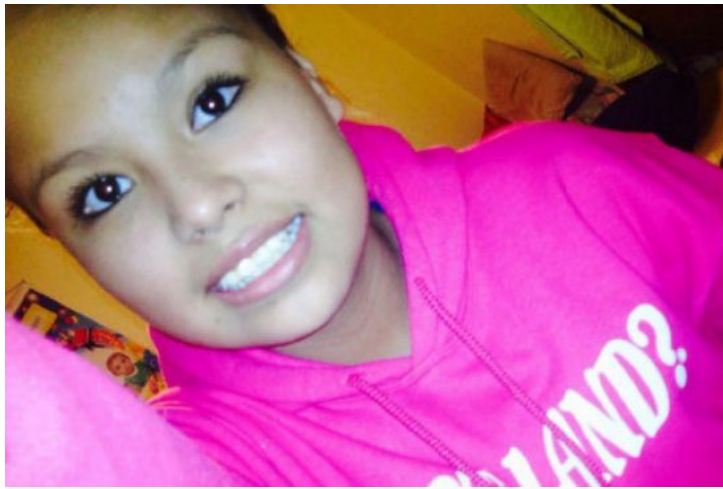
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News / Canada

Ban lifted on sweater worn by native student in Saskatchewan

Sask. school officials reversed their position on a controversial sweater worn by a First Nation student that read 'Got Land? Thank an Indian.'

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Eighth grader Tenelle Starr, of the Star Blanket Cree Nation near Balcarres, Sask., attracted controversy at her local school with her pink hooded sweatshirt. On the front, it read "Got Land?" and on the back, "Thank an Indian."

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By: Isabel Teotonio Living reporter, Published on Wed Jan 15 2014

The controversy sparked by a First Nation Saskatchewan teen banned from wearing a sweater in school that read "Got Land? Thank an Indian," has resulted in community members coming together to engage in open discussions about treaty rights.

It's also led a reversal of the ban.

"It certainly is a lesson for all of us here," said Ben Grebinski, director of education and CEO of Prairie Valley School Division. "I'm extremely grateful that our community did come together and did spend time together in resolving this challenge in a very productive and meaningful way."

In the Town of Balcarres, about 90 km northeast of Regina, the sweater first stirred debate last spring, when it was worn by students. That prompted discussions amongst officials from Balcarres Community School and community members, including leaders of the Star Blanket Cree Nation.

The school wasn't opposed to the sweater but decided that if some people found it inappropriate then students should not be allowed to wear it.

But last week, on the first day back from holiday, eighth grader Tenelle Starr, wore a pink hooded sweatshirt. On the front it read, "Got Land?" and on the back, "Thank an Indian."

The school's principal received complaints from students and community members about the slogan, which refers to the historical land treaties between the Crown and aboriginal people in what would eventually become Canada.

Sheldon Poitras, a council member for the Star Blanket Cree Nation, said some students and townspeople considered the slogan racist and discriminatory.

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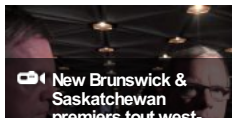
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"The shirt isn't meant to be threatening or confrontational," he said. "It's more to bring awareness, a sort of educational tool about what we're all about as First Nations people."

No grumbings, however, reached the town's office, which was unaware of the brewing controversy. The town itself has a population of just 670 people, and about 3,000 when four nearby reserves are included.

"It must be a small group complaining about the shirt in the school," said Craig Geisler, the town's assistant administrator and recreation director. "I personally don't find the shirt offensive at all."

But clearly some took offence because when Tenelle wore the sweater again, she was told to take it off by a teacher who explained that some people found it to be "racist."

"I was confused and angry, upset and embarrassed," said Tenelle, 13. "I don't know why they were offended, there was no reason to be offended."

The sweater was meant to signal her support of First Nations treaty and land rights, she explained.

Again, discussions ensued between school officials and community members. This time, they agreed the sweater was not offensive. They also realized that even though treaty education is part of the provincial curriculum, this provided an opportunity to generate additional discussion.

On Tuesday, the school held an assembly, bringing together students from Grades 7 to 12 with First Nations elders and aboriginal leaders to discuss the sweater's meaning.

"It went very well," said Poitras, who participated in the assembly. "It went so well that they're looking at developing their own shirt for the school and they're thinking of adopting the slogan: We are all treaty people."

And on Wednesday, Tenelle was back at school, happily wearing the sweater.

Her classmates treated her as they did before, she said: "They're proud of me."

The slogan has also generated skirmishes elsewhere. In November, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network reported that a Winnipeg student wearing the same sweater was stopped from boarding a city bus after the driver deemed it offensive.

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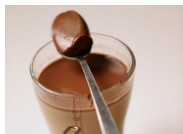
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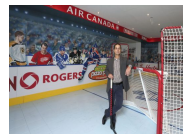
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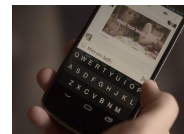
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