

# Native American Rights Fund

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*Sent via Email*

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Dear Chairman Spencer and Board of Trustees Members,

The Native American Rights Fund (“NARF”) writes in regard to the Classical Charter Schools of Leland (the “School” or “CCSL”) policy that requires boys to wear their hair short. This School policy is a gross violation of students’ religious and cultural beliefs that disproportionately impacts Native American students attending CCSL. Since time immemorial, many Tribes and Indigenous communities have placed significant cultural and religious importance on hair and to many is an important aspect of Indigenous identity. This predates

European contact and the founding of the United States, when settlers began imposing Western hairstyles on tribal communities. The School's hair requirement harkens back to the days of assimilationist policies prevalent during the boarding-school era, in which Native children were forced to cut their hair in order to "kill the Indian, save the man." The attempted erasure of Indigenous identity through the forced cutting of hair is not new to this country. Policies such as the CCSL hair requirement are simply modern updates to these painful moments in our nation's history.

While NARF was pleased to learn that CCSL will not force boys to cut their hair for the remainder of this school year, it is troubling that this policy has not been permanently repealed. Native children attending the School should not be subject to the uncertainty of whether CCSL may demand them to cut their hair next school year. Similarly, the parents of Native children, when deciding where to enroll next school year, should not be forced to choose between a school that places assimilationist policies on its students, and another school that may be of lesser educational quality, farther away, or generally less convenient to attend.

As CCSL should be aware, the School's discriminatory hair policy appears to be in violation of several federal and state civil rights laws, including the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment and freedom of religion under the North Carolina Constitution. The exercise of cultural and religious beliefs by Native American boys wearing long hair is just as significant as any exercise of religion by the majority of students at CCSL and equally protected under the law. CCSL should fully recognize its moral and legal obligations and allow Native American boys to wear their hair in accordance with their cultural and religious beliefs.

NARF calls on CCSL to permanently repeal its hair requirement for boys so that Native American students and their parents can have the certainty that their religious beliefs and cultural identity will not be under threat from the School. It is also imperative for the CCSL Board of Trustees to place this issue on the agenda for its Thursday, April 27 meeting to permanently repeal this harmful policy, especially considering that the start of the CCSL school year begins on July 18.

Sincerely,

Mark Carter, *Staff Attorney*  
Jacqueline De León, *Senior Staff Attorney*

**Native American Rights Fund**