



## **VICTORY FOR NATIVE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

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Today the ACLU of Louisiana (ACLU) and the Native American Rights' Fund in Boulder, Colorado (NARF) announced a victory on behalf of a Native American child attending public school in St. Tammany Parish. Curtis Harjo is a five-year-old Native American child who wears his hair in a neat braid down his back. The Harjo's religion, like that of many Native Americans, includes a belief that hair should not be cut, except as a symbol of mourning upon the death of a loved one. The principal at Curtis' elementary school advised his mother that he would be required to cut his hair to continue to attend school even though to do so would violate his family's religion.

The ACLU and NARF represented Curtis and his mother, Joni, in their fight to stand up for the rights of all Americans to exercise their religion, and to express themselves culturally. The principal rejected the Harjo's request for an exemption to the dress code. The Harjos appealed, but the Superintendent of Schools, Gayle Sloan, ruled that Curtis could only attend school if he wore his hair in a bun. Because doing so still suggests that Curtis must hide his religious beliefs, the Harjos appealed that decision to the St. Tammany Parish School Board, in the letter attached.

The ACLU has just learned that Superintendent Sloan reversed her previous decision, and has decided to allow Curtis to attend school and continue to wear his hair in the single neat braid with which he began the school year, and which is consistent with his religious principles.

"We are so glad that Curtis Harjo and his family bravely stood up for their religious and cultural rights," said Katie Schwartzmann, ACLU of Louisiana Legal Director. "All religions are equally deserving of respect and protection. Curtis should be allowed to wear his hair in keeping with his religious and cultural identity, just as a Christian student should be allowed to wear a crucifix to school. The Constitution protects the rights of all children and parents."

"We just wanted Curtis to be able to go to school without prejudice," said Joni Harjo, mother of five-year-old Curtis Harjo. "It might seem to some people that Native Americans are gone, but we are not. We are still here, and I think we just had to open the school's eyes to that. It is very important for Curtis to be able to go to school and be himself. We are so happy."

Steven Moore, an attorney with the Native American Rights Fund, stated, “we at the Native American Rights Fund are pleased that Superintendent Sloan made the correct and just decision here. It shows that she paid careful attention to the facts, especially to the sincerely held beliefs of the Harjo family, in reaching her decision. This sets an important precedent in St. Tammany Parish, and throughout the United States, where local school districts are asked to understand, respect and work with the beliefs and traditions of Indian people with school age children. We are elated for Joni Harjo and her son, Curtis, and their family.”

The Harjo family was represented by Katie Schwartzmann, Legal Director of the ACLU of Louisiana, Stephen Pevar from the National Office of the ACLU, and Steve Moore of the Native American Rights’ Fund.