

This School Board Got Rid of Columbus Day. Then Thanksgiving Went, Too.

A New Jersey school district, criticized for renaming the day for Indigenous people, eliminated the names of all holidays. It might undo that, too.

By Tracey Tully

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A month ago, the school board in a northern New Jersey suburb followed the lead of at least six other states and scores of municipalities when it voted unanimously to rename Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples' Day.

[Outrage](#) followed, prompting the district to approve an extreme workaround intended to sidestep the complicated terrain of identity politics in an increasingly polarized nation: Holidays from school would no longer be labeled on the district calendar at all.

Rosh Hashana, Thanksgiving, Veterans Day and the second Monday in October — whatever it might be called — would instead be marked only as “day off” from school in Randolph, a township about 40 miles west of New York City.

Then, on Wednesday, the school board said it was considering a complete about-face, scheduling a meeting for next week to vote on a resolution to restore all holiday names, including Columbus Day, to the [district's calendar](#).

“Their attempt to address diversity essentially has caused division,” said State Senator Anthony M. Bucco, a Republican who represents the township. “By trying to make everything vanilla, you lose that sense of diversity.”

The controversy comes as the country grapples with how to recognize historical figures that are seen as [symbols of white supremacy](#). In the wake of George Floyd's murder by a police officer in Minneapolis, [statues of Columbus](#) and Civil War leaders have been defaced, toppled or removed in cities across the country.

Last month, New York City, which operates the country's largest school system, [faced criticism](#) after initially trying to rename Columbus Day for Indigenous people. In response, the city similarly attempted to split the difference: The second Monday in October is now labeled [Italian Heritage Day/Indigenous People's Day](#) on school calendars.

The convoluted back-and-forth in Randolph may itself be harmful to students' understanding of Columbus's role in history, the treatment of Native Americans and the

origins of the holiday, said Leslie Wilson, a professor of history at Montclair State University in New Jersey who has spoken on panels about renaming Columbus Day.

“Now kids don’t know what to believe anymore,” Dr. Wilson said. “Everyone is confused.”

A spokesman for Randolph Township Schools said board members would have no comment before Monday’s meeting. The superintendent, he said, had no involvement in the holiday-naming decisions and also would have no comment.

The resolution — the only item of new business on the [agenda](#) for next week’s meeting — states that “the Board of Education hereby rescinds the action taken at the June 10, 2021, meeting removing the names of all holidays from the school district calendar.”

Randolph, an affluent Morris County township of about 25,000 people, is 80 percent white; no residents identify as Native American, according to the most recent [census data](#) available. There are four recognized [Native American tribes](#) in New Jersey, including the [Ramapough Lenape Indian Nation](#), which is based in the northern section of the state.

The [initiative to rename Columbus Day](#) reportedly stemmed from a recommendation by a local diversity and inclusion committee.

The board approved the name change on [May 13](#), after minimal discussion, and then backtracked earlier this month.

One online [petition](#) last month drew more than 1,100 signatures and comments criticizing “woke” cancel culture. A [second petition](#) calling for the immediate resignation of the superintendent and board members generated more than 4,000 signatures and a flurry of media attention.

The board said its decision had been “misconstrued” and that the meaning behind the unnamed holidays would still be taught.

“Schools will still be closed on the days that we originally approved and our children will know why,” the board explained on Sunday in a [statement](#).

Senator Bucco was among those who spoke out against renaming Columbus Day at last Thursday’s raucous board meeting. He said he was heartened that the school calendar may restore the names of all state and federal holidays.

“If they want to add Indigenous Peoples’ Day to the calendar, then by all means do it,” he said. “But don’t violate Italian Americans’ civil rights by removing only them.”

Columbus Day has been celebrated as a federal holiday on the second Monday of October since 1971, according to the [Library of Congress](#), but has been observed for centuries. The first recorded celebration was in New York City in 1792. In 1892, then-

President Benjamin Harrison issued a proclamation that recommended local celebrations, in part in response to [anti-Catholic](#) and [anti-Italian](#) sentiments and the [murder of 11 Sicilian men](#) in New Orleans.

New York and New Jersey are home to the country's largest populations of residents who identify as Italian American.

Ten miles north of Randolph, a section of Interstate Route 80 is named [Christopher Columbus Highway](#).

"You can't revise history," said State Senator Joseph Pennacchio, a Republican who has been a vocal supporter of retaining the Columbus Day holiday and [statues](#) honoring the controversial explorer.

Though Columbus, who is thought to have been born in Genoa, Italy, but sailed for Spain, is often credited with discovering America, he never actually set foot on the continental United States. [Millions](#) of people were already living in North America in 1492 and those opposed to naming the holiday in Columbus's honor note that his journey encouraged centuries of exploitation of Native Americans.

Dr. Wilson said that Columbus's significant contributions to exploration and trade should be taught alongside his role in enslaving original inhabitants of the islands he colonized.

"I think we don't understand the true Columbus because we never did," he said. "We learned the poem and we never went beyond that."

In 1990, South Dakota became the first state to rename the holiday Native American Day.

At least five other states and 130 cities and towns have since renamed the holiday in honor of Indigenous people, and governors of several other states have issued [executive orders](#) that remove Columbus Day from state calendars.

In New Jersey, [Newark](#) and [Princeton](#) observe Indigenous Peoples' Day but a statewide effort last year to [rename Columbus Day](#) collapsed; New York City still holds the largest Columbus Day parade in the country.

In October 2019, as Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo of New York and Bill de Blasio, the mayor of New York City, marched in the parade, Native Americans gathered for a [two-day celebration](#) on Randalls Island.

A similar [Indigenous Peoples Day in New York City](#) is scheduled for October, in a year that also saw the country's first Native American appointed to a Cabinet-level agency. [Deb Haaland](#), a congressional representative from New Mexico and a Laguna Pueblo citizen, took over the [Interior Department](#) in March.

It is unclear what will be decided on Monday when the Randolph school board meets. The resolution under consideration states, in part, that the district will revert to the school calendar “as it existed prior to the board’s May 13, 2021, meeting,” and add any additional state and federal holidays that had not been listed.

On Friday, for example, New Jersey will recognize [Juneteenth](#) as a holiday for the first time, in commemoration of the end of slavery in the United States.

Senator Pennacchio, who is Italian and grew up in Brooklyn, said he had fought to preserve Columbus Day as a way to recognize Italian Americans’ significant contributions to the country.

“It’s a symbol,” he said, “of the hard work that Italian Americans put into this country.”