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# Staunton uneasy about possible aftermath of high school name debate



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After speaking in favor of changing the name of Robert E. Lee High School at a summer meeting of the Staunton City School Board, the Rev. Edward Scott said “God bless you” to everyone he encountered before leaving the meeting room.

He said he walked up to two people wearing blue “Save the Name” buttons to share the same well wishes he’d given to other attendees.

“One looked at me with stony silence,” Scott said. “And the other, she said, ‘Well, I hope he doesn’t bless you.’”

When Staunton artist Craig Peterson stopped by the park where Save the Name advocates were handing out yard signs this summer, he said someone approached the small group gathered there and accused them of being racists for their stance on the school’s name.

“She said, ‘You all are racist and bigots,’” Peterson said. “She just went on and on ... but I’m none of those.”

While many residents say years-long debate over the name of Staunton’s Robert E. Lee High School has been mostly civil, incidents like these have left some disturbed and unsure of what will happen in the divided community after a school board vote, which could come as early as Oct. 8. In some communities nationwide, similar controversies have left lingering wounds, which experts say can be assuaged with open, honest conversation.

## Increasing pressures

Debate over the school’s name has become more contentious as time goes on, said Henry Goodson, a 2018 graduate of Robert E. Lee High School and name-change advocate. School-

day discussions were mostly respectful while Goodson was a student, but still, these conversations were “less than cordial” at times, he said.

Cece Bernard, a Robert E. Lee sophomore who thinks the name should be changed, said the subject has come up more and more often at school. She described a recent situation where a “controlled” but tense argument broke out after one student simply mentioned the controversy in class.

Some describe a recent Staunton school board meeting as evidence of growing friction. The September meeting, where the board heard a diversity and inclusion report from the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities, was at capacity, with advocates on both sides filling the meeting room and spilling into the hallway. Scott said that at times, the tone of the meeting was angry and venomous.

“There was a little yelling, and ... I saw real anger on some faces. That troubles me,” said former elementary school teacher and Staunton resident Peggy Roberson, who wants the name to be changed.

Public debate over the school name began three years ago, when a group of Staunton citizens asked the district’s former superintendent and school board to rename it, citing concerns about naming a public high school after a Confederate general. Others told officials they wanted the name Robert E. Lee High School to stay.

Then Staunton City Schools attracted national attention ahead of the 2016 presidential election when the high school’s secretary and former principal came to school dressed as Hillary Clinton in an inmate outfit and Donald Trump. The district came under fire again in early 2017 when a teacher at Shelburne Middle School reportedly asked black students to play the role of slaves in a class play while white students played noblemen.

In February that year, Staunton Schools requested proposals from outside organizations for districtwide diversity and inclusion training, which was carried out by VCIC during the 2017-18 academic year.

The district partnered with VCIC again in October 2017 to implement a months-long community engagement effort, offering opportunities for residents to give input on not just the school name but also issues relating broadly to diversity and inclusion in focus groups and listening sessions.

The process culminated in the diversity and inclusion report presented to the school board at its last meeting. The board planned to discuss the document at a Sept. 29 retreat, said

Superintendent Garrett Smith.

A vote on the name could happen as early as Oct. 8, during the board's next regular meeting, Smith said, but the matter will be settled before the end of the calendar year at the latest.

## **Two realities**

During VCIC's community engagement process, some participants said the debate over the name of Robert E. Lee High School had created new grievances in Staunton, while others said they had felt marginalized or worried about diversity and inclusivity for years, said Jonathan Zur, the VCIC's president and CEO.

"Both of those realities ... for people, are honest," Zur said. "I think some people have either been deeply aware of these divisions that are now being named, and others either didn't experience them, or didn't see them, or didn't believe them."

Community issues of all kinds may go unnoticed by some residents if those who are impacted don't feel like they have the power or platform to voice their concerns, said Lori Britt, director of the Institute for Constructive Advocacy and Dialogue at James Madison University.

In Staunton, black residents especially may be reluctant to discuss grievances openly because they carry a "psychological burden" from the city's segregated past, said Scott, a pastor at Allen Chapel and an associate professor at Mary Baldwin University. They might not feel comfortable sharing their opinions about the school's name or other issues in public forums, like school board meetings, because they're used to having no voice at all, he said.

Goodson called the controversy "a local reflection of a national problem." The entire country – not just Staunton – is dealing with issues of race, heritage and a "struggle between what some people consider over-political correctness and what some people consider to be getting some measure of justice and balance," he said.

## **The national discussion**

Nationwide, 38 schools named after Confederate figures have been renamed, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. More than 100 remain, including 15 in Virginia.

Calls to remove monuments and memorials honoring Confederate figures gained national momentum after the 2015 Charleston church massacre, in which 21-year-old white supremacist Dylann Roof murdered nine African Americans during a prayer service. The

violent white supremacist rally in Charlottesville in 2017, where organizers intended to protest the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue from a park, further accelerated the movement.

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In San Antonio, Texas, the push to rename Robert E. Lee High School started in 2015. Years of heated discussion ended in a compromise when officials voted to rename the school as Legacy of Educational Excellence High School, or L.E.E. High School, in October 2017.

L.E.E. Class of 2018 graduate and name-change advocate Marcus Sampson said this particular compromise united the once-divided student body behind a shared dislike of the new name.

Many of those who wanted the name to stay the same were upset that it was changed at all, and those advocating for the name change didn't like the remaining ties to the original name, explained fellow L.E.E. 2018 graduate and name-change advocate Kenny Strawn.

But for L.E.E. keep-the-name advocate Benjamin White, a 2017 grad, the compromise maintained an important link to the school's original name, which was a point of pride for many in the community.

"We did everything we could ... to keep the name," White said. "I know a lot of people are still angry about the decision that was made by the district, but I've kind of accepted it at this point."

In another Texas city, a lack of a decision is still troubling some residents. Following almost a year of passionate discussion in Tyler, Texas, the district's school board in August declined to vote on the name of their own Robert E. Lee High School. Tyler resident DG Montalvo, who advocated for a name change, said the community hasn't recovered.

As the public debate wore on, it became more heated and vitriolic, Montalvo said. Attacks were often personal, and the divide seemed to deepen after the no-vote.

"Both sides are saying they won't forget," he said.

A vote might have given the city closure, he said, but for now, some hope history will help the community move forward. After the school board's decision, Montalvo and others pushing for the name change launched Tyler History, a website aimed at shedding light on racist elements of the city's past.

“Our hope would be that by acknowledging that we have a racist history ... people will understand that this hasn’t gone away, but we don’t have to stay here,” he said.

Similarly, some have found it hard to heal in Falls Church, Virginia, where resident Chica Brunsvold said controversy over the name of the former J.E.B Stuart High School was characterized by shouting, insults and agitation. Brunsvold, who advocated for keeping the school’s name, said residents and alumni are still upset that the school was renamed as Justice High School last year.

“People are still very much divided ... I don’t think it can get better. It’s a done deal,” she said.

But Justice High School senior Julia Clark, who pushed for the name change, said that debate among students was usually respectful.

After a transition period, many students have accepted the new name, she said. Clark attributes the relatively peaceful nature of student debate to the school’s diverse student body.

“We’re used to getting challenged by different ideas ... We could come back to school the next day and sit in class with these people and form positive relationships,” Clark said. “I think, ultimately, we’ve done a good job of becoming aware that our perspective isn’t the only one.”

## **‘The other side won’t’**

Managing relationships after controversy is difficult for any community, and experts say the task becomes especially challenging when any decision is sure to upset at least one group of residents. Given the increasing tensions in Staunton, some are wondering how the community will move forward once the school board votes.

Staunton Schools employee Marnie Sheets, who wants the name to stay, said she thinks the name will be changed, and she’s afraid of what will happen to the greater community and the student body. Keep-the-name advocates will be upset about the decision, Sheets predicts, and student morale will plummet.

“We all come together as Leemen. That’s the one thing that brings us together,” she said. “To tear this apart, it really scares me for the whole school.”

If the name stays the same, Scott promised school officials that he will continue to object to the decision at every school board meeting, the professor, pastor and name-change advocate

said. He thinks the name will change and hopes for a civil community response but anticipates some lingering anger.

“I don’t see us having this tortured period of time after a change ... but they’re going to simmer. They’re going to seethe,” he said.

Staunton resident Jeremy Bryant, who declined to share his opinion on the topic because of community tensions, said he’s heard people on both sides express frustration with what they see as closed-mindedness or unwillingness to compromise from those who hold opposing views.

In Bryant’s experience, people on each side are already unwilling to broach the subject together, he said, so he worries they will simply continue to avoid open discussion after a vote.

“I hear this, ‘Well, the other side won’t,’ but I don’t hear any of those people telling me who they’ve talked to on the other side,” Bryant said. “It’s been eye-opening to me how similar the sides sound when they speak about the other.”

Ignoring unresolved concerns in any community can be problematic and even derail future discussions, said Britt, the JMU expert. Individual issues are often intertwined with other concerns, and they don’t disappear, so residents and officials should be prepared to keep addressing them.

Zur of the VCIC said that the process the school board uses to reach a decision and how they announce it will also be crucial in shaping the community’s response to the news and its path forward.

The VCIC’s report emphasizes transparency in Staunton’s decision-making process, noting that some community members “questioned Staunton City School’s transparency regarding its diversity and inclusion efforts and the potential costs associated with a potential name change,” though the district created a webpage dedicated to the topic.

In launching the year-long diversity and inclusivity review, the district set out to ensure that the community felt included, said Smith, school superintendent.

“We wanted to be able to say that everybody who had an opinion ... had a chance and had a platform to be heard, and I think we’ve accomplished that,” Smith said. “We were trying to lay out a model for other communities to follow that are dealing with similar issues.”

The VCIC report recommended an additional community dialogue series in its report to Staunton because facilitators saw a need for residents rebuild trust and explore how to stay connected despite disagreements, Zur said.

One strategy to help community members to maintain positive relationships while taking up tough subjects is to continue open discussions that focus on residents' interests and reasons for caring about a topic rather than their positions, Britt said. When people share their histories, experiences and feelings, it's easier to understand and empathize instead of demonizing those who hold opposing views.

"But the trick is getting people in the door. You have to have a track record of being a place and a space that will respect all voices and allow people to feel like they have been heard," Britt said.

This process becomes especially important when young people are involved in the debate – like in discussions about a school name, she said. Youth should see that it's possible to broach divisive subjects in a respectful, productive way so they aren't afraid of hard conversations in the future.

Britt encourages people to treat each other civically, rather than just civilly, by recognizing those on all sides as equal citizens who deserve respect.

"Whichever way that decision is made, we are still going to live next to each other ... We still share a community," Britt said. "So we have to figure out a way to address the issue that allows us to go forward together."

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