

STAUNTON CITY SCHOOLS FINAL REPORT

Presented September 10, 2018

INTRODUCTION

The Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities (VCIC) works with schools, businesses, and communities to achieve success by addressing prejudices, in all forms, in order to improve academic achievement, increase workplace productivity, and enhance local trust. Through workshops, retreats, and customized programs that raise knowledge, motivation, and skills, VCIC develops leaders who work together to achieve success throughout the Commonwealth.

Founded in 1935 as the Virginia Region of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the earliest record of our organization's work with schools dates back to the 1950's, assisting educational institutions in addressing the racial, religious and ethnic changes of that decade. Ongoing work from the 1960-1990's cemented NCCJ's (and now VCIC's) reputation as a trusted and valued resource for public and private schools alike.

In February 2017, the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities was contacted by Staunton City Schools (SCS) to begin conversations regarding diversity and inclusion in the district. After a series of general brainstorming conversations throughout the spring, SCS invited proposals for training services across the district. VCIC was honored to be selected at the end of July 2017 following a competitive application process. Workshops for educators at all school sites took place throughout the 2017-2018 school year.

In October 2017, VCIC was invited to partner with SCS in a more expanded way, thanks to grant support from the Community Foundation of the Central Blue Ridge. Our work with the district now included focus groups and community listening sessions to engage diverse stakeholders in helping the district craft a general diversity and inclusion plan, while also making a decision regarding the name of the high school. This report specifically details the process, themes, and recommendations coming from this listening period.

THE PROJECT

Over the course of five months, the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities provided several opportunities for members of the Staunton community to offer input regarding diversity and inclusion in Staunton City Schools. These included several focus groups for middle school students, high school students, educators, and community stakeholders. Additionally, VCIC facilitated two community listening sessions (which saw total attendance of approximately 375 people) and invited input via phone and email.

Questions used by VCIC to prompt conversation included:

- Do students and their families feel accepted in Staunton City Schools (SCS)?
- Are school administrators, teachers and staff offering a welcoming and inclusive environment for people of all backgrounds?

- What can SCS do to cultivate a more diverse learning environment for its students and staff?
- What can SCS do to cultivate a more welcoming and inclusive learning environment for its students and staff?
- How does the Staunton community feel about the name of Robert E. Lee High School?

EMERGING THEMES

In response to the five broad questions that framed VCIC's work, the following topics emerged as themes within the many responses and conversations with students, educators, and community stakeholders:

- ***Bessie Weller Elementary School***

A large number of community members – especially those concerned about the cost associated with changing the name of the high school – expressed concerns about the academic outcomes and perceived instability in leadership at this elementary school. Several individuals suggested that a targeted intervention may be needed in order for the school to reach its full potential.

- ***Elementary School Zones***

Multiple individuals offered opinions that reformatting elementary school zones could reduce academic and social divisions in the school district. Rather than have three K-5 schools split by geography, these individuals recommended splitting the schools by grade (K-1, 2-3, 4-5) so that, in their opinion, all students could benefit from socio-economic and racial diversity throughout their time in SCS.

- ***Hiring Practices***

Several members of the community, as well as school district employees, expressed a strong desire to see staff that reflect more diversity. In particular, participants named a need to increase the number of teachers who identify as People of Color. Some critiqued recruitment and hiring practices, and a number of people linked this concern to their concerns about the name of the high school.

- ***Achievement & Opportunity Gap***

The achievement gap – a disparity in educational performance among subgroups of students based on socioeconomic status, race, and gender – was named by some participants as a growing concern for SCS. These individuals suggested that the district focus on ongoing professional development, curriculum updates, and a review of discipline practices to mitigate these gaps.

- **Resources for Teachers**

A number of educators and parents/guardians believe that teacher salaries within SCS are lower than neighboring districts. They named a concern that this issue may be an obstacle for educator recruitment, particularly given the reported burden on teachers nationally to spend their own money on classroom supplies. Some of these individuals questioned why the district would direct resources towards a name change for the high school versus improving teacher salaries.

- **Security**

A few community members shared their concerns about the state of security at schools and their desire for SCS to increase security. They noted national news regarding school violence as a reason to focus on this area. It was also noted that not every school with SCS has a dedicated security officer in the building.

- **High School Name**

The topic that garnered the most responses and passion during VCIC's engagement was the name of Robert E. Lee High School. Several community participants brought books and articles to share, and some also wore shirts and buttons reflecting their opinions. Driving through Staunton, signs reading "Save the Name" and "But the Name Hurts" were frequently seen by VCIC staff.

Counting the number of people expressing a particular position only provides limited information regarding the overall pulse of a community. That is true both in terms of the signs posted in Staunton and the participation in the various focus groups and listening sessions facilitated by VCIC. There are a number of reasons why individuals may not have participated in the opportunities provided to offer input. As a result, we do not recommend using numeric totals as the sole reason to justify any action taken by SCS.

The following sections are dedicated to conveying in greater detail what VCIC staff heard from the community on the topic of the high school name.

REASONS PROVIDED BY COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO KEEP THE NAME

Individuals supporting the retention of "Robert E. Lee" or simply "Lee" as the name of the high school offered a variety of reasons. The most common rationales provided to VCIC follow:

(1) *The school has a proud history and the tradition would be lost if the name changes.*

Several members of the community shared a fear of losing a rich tradition and history that are connected with the school. Individuals were particularly concerned about the fate of existing trophies and school spirit. These community members expressed pride in their accomplishments at the school.

(2) *The current name is not considered to be offensive or a problem.*

A number of individuals expressed their opinion that the school's current name has always been used with pride and respect, and not used to offend anyone. They also questioned how or why the name of a school could be hurtful or make someone feel marginalized.

(3) *Limited district funds could and should be better spent on other priorities.*

Several participants had questions about the cost of renaming the high school, and they questioned why funds would be spent on that instead of other areas of need, such as teacher salaries, support for Bessie Weller Elementary School, or the condition of school buildings. A few people expressed that they were withholding judgment about this issue until they saw a budget.

(4) *Pride about the contributions and example of Robert E. Lee.*

Some alumni and community members shared quotes, books, articles, and historical references advocating for the character of Robert E. Lee. They expressed a belief that Lee provides a positive example and is well-suited to have a school named after him.

(5) *The community has not been fully engaged and a referendum should be pursued.*

Some individuals pointed to what they describe as low voter turnout in the recent School Board election as a reason to engage more community members in this decision. These individuals often cited their perception that there are more "Save the Name" signs posted around Staunton. They recommended a city-wide referendum on this issue to make the decision.

(6) *The high school name is not an issue within Staunton.*

A few individuals expressed the view that the present high school name is not a pressing concern amongst Staunton residents and that calls for a name change are fueled by forces external to the Staunton community.

REASONS PROVIDED BY COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO CHANGE THE NAME

Individuals advocating to change the name of the high school offered a number of reasons. The most common rationales provided to VCIC follow:

(1) *The name is considered to be offensive and does not create a welcoming environment.*

A number of individuals shared that they personally took offense to the current name of the high school. They found it to contradict their personal values and the welcoming environment they desire for the city and SCS. Students and alumni spoke about the

discomfort they felt walking into a building and/or wearing an athletic uniform bearing the Robert E. Lee name.

(2) *The school was not originally named for Robert E. Lee and was renamed in 1914 in response to advocacy from the United Daughters of the Confederacy.*

Several participants cited research from Clayton McClure Brooks regarding how Staunton High School became Robert E. Lee High School in 1914. They associate that change with the “Lost Cause” ideology and what they view to be a glorification of the Confederate cause.

(3) *Negative feelings about Robert E. Lee’s decisions and actions.*

Some individuals shared that they found Robert E. Lee’s decision to serve the Confederacy as treasonous to the United States and as an example of his support for enslavement. They questioned why a school would be named after an individual who they do not consider to be a role model or example for students.

(4) *The high school name prevents Staunton City Schools from recruiting a more diverse workforce.*

Community members who had concerns about the diversity of the workforce within SCS cited the name of the high school as a reason that qualified People of Color would not apply to work in the district. They suggested that changing the name would increase the candidate pool.

(5) *Some alumni prefer not to share the name of the high school with their college and when applying for jobs.*

A number of participants shared that they or their children would not display their diplomas or would tell people from other areas that they attended “Staunton High School” or “Lee High School.” They also expressed concern about how prospective employers outside of Staunton perceive the high school’s full name on resumes.

(6) *The recent School Board election gave the community an opportunity to vote on this issue.*

Individuals who advocated to change the name felt that the community expressed its opinion during the recent School Board election. They noted that all of the candidates who were elected had publicly shared their preference to change the name of the high school.

POTENTIAL COMPROMISES OFFERED BY COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Some community members suggested potential compromises regarding the name of the high school. While none of the following suggestions received widespread support, they are offered here with a summary of the feedback provided:

(1) Lee High School

It was suggested that dropping the “Robert E.” portion of the name would allow the school to maintain its heritage and school spirit while not being directly associated with any individual. Those who disagreed shared their concerns that the name would still be associated with Robert E. Lee and that the mascot would remain the “Fighting Leemen.”

(2) Staunton High School

Some individuals advocated returning to the original name of the school. They also noted that this form of name would be consistent with the practice of many other school districts that use a school’s location in the name. However, others noted that the school system was segregated when it was Staunton High School, while a few also expressed their concern that the Staunton family enslaved people.

(3) Booker T. Washington High School

VCIC received a suggestion by email to use the name of Staunton’s historically African American high school prior to integration. Although Booker T. Washington’s name continues to be associated with that former school building (which is presently a community center), placing the name on the current high school would be an additional way to honor the community’s history.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

While participants throughout VCIC’s engagement were respectful and civil in their communication, there are clear community divisions in terms of the high school’s name. The name of Robert E. Lee High School is a source of pride for some and a point of contention and hurt for others. While many issues surfaced when we asked community members about diversity and inclusion within SCS, the name of the high school was a consistent topic of conversation. A decision will need to be made on this issue before the district can move forward on other priorities.

From the many comments offered throughout this engagement, VCIC perceived a need for greater empathy for and between community members. Individuals advocating for changing the name of the high school expressed feeling dismissed and labeled as outsiders. Those who advocated to keep the name shared concern that they were being labeled as racist. The community would benefit from a process of dialogue and listening that would allow neighbors to learn more about each other and break down perceived and actual divisions within Staunton.

Many community members questioned Staunton City School’s transparency regarding its diversity and inclusion efforts and the potential costs associated with a potential name change for the high school. While SCS has posted a website detailing the diversity and inclusion engagement and process, more work may need to be done to make sure the community knows about and supports this endeavor. Similarly, being clear about costs involved in a name change and the decision-making process will continue to be important.

There are also clear disagreements related to Staunton's history and Robert E. Lee. The community would benefit from a public education process that could be engaged by local and national historians to share an honest, unbiased accounting. Examples such as "The Future of Richmond's Past" (now titled "Richmond's Journey") could be instructive for the Staunton community.

Regardless of the outcome, the community will need to consider ways to come together, listen, and learn about one another and about local history.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE VIRGINIA CENTER FOR INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

Whether or not the district decides to change the name of Robert E. Lee High School, a number of actions should be taken to support the Staunton community and SCS's work on diversity and inclusion:

(1) *Be clear about the process and cost associated with whatever future decisions are made.*

A number of questions remain about how and when the school board will make a decision on this issue. It will be critical that SCS offer and maintain an open and transparent process. In particular, the district needs to be clear about costs associated with any decisions that are made and the source of those funds.

(2) *Create and implement a community dialogue series.*

Examples could include the "Study Circles" model that are convened by Everyday Democracy, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's "Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation" enterprise, and "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Beloved Community Conversations" currently being conducted by the Virginia Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Commission. Alternatively, a customized process could be developed for Staunton that includes sustained dialogue groups led by trained facilitators. A similar process can be implemented within the high school for students and educators.

(3) *Consider dedicating space within the high school to display the complete history.*

There is an important opportunity to display the history of the school for students and community members, including Staunton High School, Robert E. Lee High School, and Booker T. Washington High School. With high school renovations already in the works, this is an ideal time to identify a space and a process to share a complete and honest history and display past, present, and future trophies and other paraphernalia.

(4) *Engage alumni in the process for future decision-making.*

However the district proceeds, there are likely going to be stakeholders who express disagreement or disappointment with SCS. Proactively identifying future opportunities for engagement and input will be important to maintain a relationship with those who do

not approve of decisions that are made. This will be critical to ensure that all stakeholders maintain their dignity and have a connection to the school.

(5) *Focus future efforts on reducing achievement and opportunity gaps.*

As SCS prepares to launch a Strategic Plan related to diversity and inclusion, the primary focus should be on achievement and opportunity gaps. All of the areas of concern raised beyond the name are connected to this issue. Identifying strategies related to curriculum, professional development, policies, student programs, recruitment and retention, and discipline will be critical, as will engaging diverse stakeholders in the work of implementing actions.

CLOSING

These recommendations are ambitious, but they are also focused. Every effort has been made to build upon the perspectives shared throughout VCIC's work with the school district. It must be acknowledged that while staff from the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities spent a great deal of time on-site and in conversation with members of the Staunton and SCS community, the only way to fully know the day-to-day life of the school district is to be there. As such, some recommendations may require nuance or slight revision in order to best be implemented.

Several factors contributed to the success of this project. The commitment of the school and community to designate significant time to work on these issues is important and communicates a level of investment that seemed to be understood and appreciated by all of the people we encountered. District leaders in particular were willing to take risks, share updates with the community, and grapple with the issues being addressed. It has been a very positive experience for the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities to work with Staunton City Schools, and we appreciate the opportunity to partner on this effort. We sincerely hope that the district and community benefit from our work.