



What's in a name? History, and quite a bit of money

Heather Kays

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There's the Confederacy. And then there's the cost.

Confederate cavalry Gen. James Ewell Brown (Jeb) Stuart of the Army of Northern Virginia died at the Battle of Yellow Tavern on May 11, 1864. Now some of his fellow northern Virginians are trying to kill him again.

An effort to change the name of J.E.B. Stuart High School in Falls Church, Va., is being pushed by parents, students and alumni. Actress Julianne Moore and movie producer Bruce Cohen — both of whom attended Stuart — started an online petition to change the name, which they say represents “a history of racism.”

Whether one thinks such moves are long-delayed justice or a whitewashing of history, Fairfax County officials estimate that the name change would cost almost \$700,000.

On Thursday, the school board will vote on a resolution to create a working group to study a name change. If history is any guide — Confederate memorials and monuments have been cut down across the South lately like Federal infantry at Cold Harbor — Stuart will fall again.

No alternative name has been chosen, but Moore and Cohen have suggested Thurgood Marshall to honor the first African-American Supreme Court justice and longtime attorney for the NAACP.

Similar cases have popped up elsewhere in the country, including in the Houston Independent School District, where the school board approved changing the names of seven schools, including ones named for Stuart's boss, Robert E. Lee, and Southern poet Sidney Lanier, who was not a Confederate leader but a soldier in the ranks and blockade runner during the Civil War (a popular lake in Georgia also bears his name).

Some Lanier parents said the school board misled taxpayers about the costs associated with the name changes. According to a lawsuit filed against the school district by several residents, “HISD is in dire financial straits. In December 2015, a desperate HISD approved borrowing over \$212 million to cover a shortfall in its nearly \$2 billion bond program, the largest school bond in Texas history.”

Some estimates say the Houston name changes will cost almost a half million dollars per school.

The costs of buying new signs, stationary, uniforms and other related expenses can be exorbitant in a time when many school districts are struggling to fund basic educational needs.

Supporters of the name changes argue that righting historical wrongs is worth the price.

And then there is the collateral effect of the community engaging in a spirited debate about an important civic institution.

That has positive aspects, but can also add to the emotional costs, says Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom.

"I can't say a lot about the financial costs — they could be pretty high with new signage, team uniforms, diplomas, maybe having to inform colleges and employers of the name change — but I think the social costs of name changing can be appreciable," McCluskey said. "As you can get a sense for with our [Public Schooling Battle Map](#), conflicts over public school names or mascots are fairly common, and they often pit neighbor against neighbor or group against group. Is the name offensive? Is it a positive part of one's identity? Do alums have an emotional connection to it? It's a zero-sum game that too often wrenches communities and leaves people feeling hurt, inflicting social and emotional costs that may be greater than the financial ones.

Jonathan Butcher, education director at the Goldwater Institute, [wrote a paper](#) that postulated public school leaders who renamed schools after something simple, like an animal or a tree, were missing a part of the civic mission of public schooling.

"Public schools are a part of a community, so it's good to know that people are getting involved in making decisions that matter to families," he told Watchdog, "but they should not be afraid to choose someone who represents important values that we want to pass on to students about leadership and virtue and courage."

That's what previous generations thought they were doing when they named schools after Lee and Stuart. Now a new generation is looking for different heroes.

Butcher did not look into the cost factor, but said there is value in allowing the court of public opinion to rule when it comes to naming neighborhood schools.

"Civic values — what it means to be an engaged, free, and responsible citizen — are important," said Butcher. "School leaders and their communities should demonstrate a willingness to embrace an individual that represents those values as a part of naming a local school."

Over the decades, those values change, and the names change with it. But paying the tab for those evolving standards is a constant.