

**Public Hearing on Renaming  
October 29, 2020 School Board Meeting  
Comments by Tricia A. Maher-Miller**

I have lived in Alexandria for 27 years, 20 of those as a parent. In 2015 our child made a decision to move from independent school to public school and entered as a ninth grader at the Minnie Howard campus of T.C. Williams. I learned quickly that our school system was struggling. A student could be in the same building on the same hallway as another student, yet receive an entirely different education based on their advisor, teacher assignments, and self-advocacy skills. I quickly realized that I needed to pay attention, get involved, and be a better member of our community.

The loop includes a requisite viewing of *Remember the Titans*. Each time I saw Coaches Boone and Yoast at parties and events, they, like Mayor Euille and Representative Moran, were always surrounded by admirers. I had no reason not to believe the story. If it hadn't been true, how could it have been permitted to be told? I never asked who T.C. Williams was. This is Alexandria; of course he was a good man. How many of you always assumed the same? How many of you still do?

It was about a year into our time at ACPS, after I'd agreed to work with ACPS students *pro bono* in my role as an academic tutor and as an advocate for students who need 504 and IEP support, that I started to see the lack of fairness within the system. It was at a local lunch spot that I heard it said for the first time: "Not only is there inequity in the system, but the school is named for a man who fought for segregation, a man who tried to exclude those very students whom you are supporting."

One need not spend much time researching who he was. One need only read one or two articles, interviews, accounts. And then there are books too... entire books about what a monster he was. The only high school in our diverse, progressive city honors an arch-segregationist and avowed racist who valued neither diversity nor progress.

Allowing T.C. Williams' name to remain in a place of honor sends a clear message to our Black students and to our Black citizens: They have been permitted to attend T.C. Williams High School not because we as Alexandrians value them as vital members of our community and recognize their right to a quality education, but because the man after whom their school is named lost the battle to keep them out. Read it again: He *lost* the battle to keep them out, and that is why they are at Alexandria's high school.

That's the history and our reality. Now, imagine being a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person of Color) in Alexandria in 2020. Every day the students walk into a building that proudly displays the flags of the many countries from which its students originate. However, this does not mean that diversity is celebrated and honored at T.C. Williams.

You may say, “No, that’s not me. I value all people.” However, unless you are actively fighting with us to get his name off of that school, I am sorry to let you know: You are complicit.

The name of the school, imprinted on the signs at the school, on the letterhead used for all communication, on the students’ sports uniforms and spirit gear, and on every diploma, transcript, and all other official records, honors a man who thought African Americans and children with learning disabilities should be educated in segregated, anything-but-equal schools. The name “T.C. Williams” must make BIPOC students wonder if they are really wanted and welcome. BIPOC students must wonder, if, after all these decades of supposed progress, this city is still telling them they are not good enough.

And what message is the name sending to every student who attends the high school and to every person who knows of Williams’ prolonged and concerted efforts to keep African Americans from attending all-white schools for more than 30 years?

There are people in our City who believe that changing the name of our high school is a mistake. There is a renaming “process” in place that includes the possibility that Williams’ name will remain on our school. Our history has been written; we cannot change it. However, it should disgust and mortify us, and it should also motivate us to fight a school system that continues to abide systemic racism. We cannot rewrite our racist history, but it is time, NOW, to rewrite our future.