

July 9, 2020

Alexandria City School Board
1340 Braddock Place, Suite 610
Alexandria, VA 22314

RE: High School Renaming Project

Thank you, Chairwoman Anderson, Vice Chair Nolan, and Members of the Alexandria City School Board for the opportunity to address the panel on the question of renaming T.C. Williams High School.

I am Maria Matthews, a second generation T.C. Williams alum and parent of two future alums. As a proud graduate of the Class of 2001, I am disappointed to see that a movement is underway to change the name of the city's only public high school.

While I acknowledge the concerns raised by my fellow Alexandrians, I believe they are looking past the emotional connection that alumni hold for the school. As former Mayor Euille, also a fellow alum, indicated in a recent *Alexandria Times* article, the school has a strong hold on those of us who have the privilege to walk those halls.

In my experience as student and city resident, no other community comes together to uplift its students the way Alexandria supports its future high school graduates. For the better part of 55 years, Alexandria has supported its Mighty Titans and making T.C. Williams more than just the students, faculty and staff that roam its halls. We are a vast network of alumni from all walks of life who are proud to call T.C. Williams our launching point thanks the support of Alexandria's business and private citizen's alike.

From athletics to the Scholarship Fund of Alexandria to unique extracurricular activities, T.C. Williams students are given the opportunity to develop skills that lead them down whatever paths their hearts desire. While my path led me away from Alexandria for roughly a decade, I returned because I wanted my children to be able to say that they too were T.C. Williams graduates – like my husband and myself. It was our love of T.C. Williams and our treasured high school memories brought us back to Alexandria where a decade from now, we look forward to draping our children in enormous hugs when they receive their newly minted T.C. Williams High School diplomas. At their young ages, they are already looking forward to walking our footsteps and one day walking the halls of what their mom and dad still refer to as the “new high school building”.

While I realize that mine is nothing more than an impassioned plea from a passionate alum, I can tell you that I know no other high school that has such a pull on its alumnae. We return to volunteer, fundraise, and support a community that gave us so very much. While Shakespeare's

“What’s in a name?” may seem applicable in this instance, I would counter that a name is everything. While T.C. Williams himself may have held highly disagreeable thoughts, I think the school’s diverse student body routinely disproves his way of thinking. Each cohort of students sent off into the world seeks to make it a better place, and like myself, looks back I hope, to happily calls T.C. Williams home.

I ask that the school board not further sever what little ties alumni like myself have to our beloved high school. When the renovation of the high school began not long after my graduation I was deeply saddened. While I knew it would mean better opportunities for future alum, it meant that the name of the high school was all we really had to hold on to as a tie to our alma matter. While the “new” building is beautiful, I can tell you that one of my most thrilling days was winning a brick from the old building at the Scholarship Fund Gala’s Silent Auction! In addition to being another way my family has ties to T.C., it is a wonderful way to get others to talk about their high school experiences – and I can tell you that none seem to parallel what T.C. Williams does for its students.

It is my deepest hope that the School board, and our community at large, can separate the legacy of T.C. Williams, the person, from T.C. Williams High School. Do not further sever the ties that we have to our legacy as students. Let the achievements of my fellow alums rewrite the history of the T.C. Williams name. In my many travels, I can tell you that T.C. Williams thanks to a moderately well-known Disney film, *Remember the Titans*, has put our school in the hearts of so many worldwide. Our high school, and its name, is what so many hold up as a bastion of unity and positivity. It lets others know that our school’s ability to put differences aside is possible despite popular sentiment. I hope that we can agree that in these trying times this is the ray of hope our community, and our world needs. Simultaneously, I can attest that no one has ever once raise an eyebrow at the origins of the name or questioned the origins of its name.

In short, the goodwill and notoriety created by the thousands who have walked its halls since T.C. Williams High School first opened, has created its own identity that has buried the legacy of its namesake. In the public eye the name belongs only to the school and those of us fortunate enough to call home. It is not something that we should throw away so easily.

Thank you for the consideration of my feedback. I wish you the best in your deliberations as you launch the exploratory committee.

Respectfully yours,

Maria D. Matthews
T.C. Williams Alum, Class of 2001