

# SCHOOL NAME DEBATE GETS HEATED

In Mathews, calls to change name of Lee-Jackson Elementary met with anger

BY MATT JONES  
Staff writer

MATHEWS — It was standing room only Tuesday night inside the Mathews High School media center.

“I’ll make this very short, and it’s just my opinion,” Tom Noble told the School Board. “I think Ms. Turner is a racist.”

Several people gasped. Kamilah Turner started the petition that the board was there to discuss — seeking a new name for Lee-Jackson

Elementary. The county’s only elementary school has borne the name of Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson since at least the early 1900s.

Turner’s petition, coinciding with a movement across the state and country to rename schools named for Confederate sympathizers, has brought the issue to the board for the first time since 1995.

She grew up in Mathews, attended Lee-Jackson and graduated from Mathews High School in 2001 before working as a professional

dancer. Her mother teaches at the elementary school.

“A lot of people were talking but no one was actually taking action,” Turner said. “One day, I literally looked at mom and said, ‘Well, if no one else is going to do it, then I’m going to do it. And then, hopefully something will happen.’”

Earlier this month, Gov. Ralph Northam sent a letter to school board chairs across the state requesting they take the names of Confederates and Confederate sympathizers off schools.

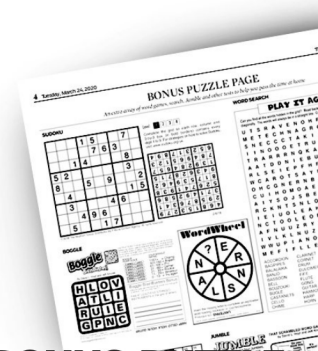
The Norfolk School Board is considering renaming three

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MATT JONES/STAFF




Kamilah Turner asks the Mathews School Board to rename Lee-Jackson Elementary on Tuesday. A man at the meeting called her “a racist.”



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schools named for Confederates. The Hampton School Board is investigating school names, including an elementary school named for Confederate officer John Baytop Cary.

York County has an elementary school named for General John Magruder. Newport News has an elementary school named for Horace Epes, who fought with the Virginia Military Institute Corps of Cadets in 1865.

Lee-Jackson is one of only a few schools named for Lee or Jackson left in the state. Hampton renamed the Campus at Lee in 2017. Prince William and Fairfax counties have renamed schools named for them this summer.

But in Mathews, the proposal to

change the name was met with resistance.

Diana Turner, who was in school around the time the county’s schools integrated, said she had a petition with over 400 signatures to keep the name. Her former classmate, John Craig Lewis, brought old school photos to the meeting.

“I have loved my school years, just like John Craig,” said Diana Turner, who is white. “Never had any problems with segregation.”

Kamilah Turner said the Confederate iconography was not quite as overt when she was growing up in Mathews, but now she sees it more often. There are the large Confederate flags in North and on Route 14 and the monument outside the old courthouse. The sign that welcomes drivers on Route 14 to the county mentions Sally Tompkins, believed to be the first woman commissioned officer in

the Confederate Army. The road also goes by the earthworks of Fort Nonsense, built by slaves in 1861.

Board chair John Priest said that he received a number of emails about the proposal, saying only they weren’t overwhelmingly favoring either way. Most of the speakers who addressed the School Board Tuesday were against it.

Several speakers chastised the board for considering spending money on it. Lost revenues due to closures left the district in a tight spot at the end of last fiscal year, Superintendent Nancy Welch said. Money that the schools planned to use to buy whiteboards for classrooms disappeared.

“Considering that we’ve got whiteboards that aren’t hung, walls that need painting, and we’re going to worry about a name that nobody was really offended by until somebody said, wake up, be offended?”

Donald Morgan said.

Some speakers demanded that neighboring Thomas Hunter Middle School be renamed if the board chooses to rename the elementary school. Thomas Hunter, who died in 1910 at the age of 104, was enslaved on a Port Haywood plantation.

Others called back to their heritage and their concerns that changing the name would “erase history.”

“I don’t think that the Black person is the only person oppressed,” Sharon Frye told the board. “What’s worse than a Black oppressed person is a white oppressed person.”

Speakers in favor of the change disputed those readings of history.

“I can’t believe we’re having this debate at this late of date in time,” said Doug Ward. “No child should be forced to attend an institution that’s entrusted with their learning that was named after two men who

fought to keep a people enslaved and took up arms against the stars and stripes.”

Priest said the board will not make a decision anytime soon. They plan to revisit the issue early next year, after a committee studies the issue.

In 1995, the School Board appointed a committee to reconsider the name when the school was rebuilt. It decided to keep the name.

Daily Press archives also show that the School Board was asked to reconsider the name in 1974 by the Gloucester-Mathews Triple-S Club. The issue was punted before eventually being dropped.

“I hope that that’s not what’s going to happen this time,” Kamilah Turner said.

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