TSCA Newsletter

A mascot by any other name: Understanding the impact of the Rebel as a high school mascot

From the pages of textbooks, television screens, and smartphones, we have witnessed the atrocities enacted upon people of color in the United States. From the moment European settlers first landed on native soil, racial genocide and abuse have been utilized by white America to both gain and retain power. Racism, whether we would like to admit it or not, is as American as apple pie. Education is key, but can it change culture? Envision, after learning about the atrocities of the Confederate south, injustices during the civil rights movement, and continued racism in the U.S., you enter your school hallway with the knowledge that your school mascot and crest continue to celebrate the heritage of the Confederate south while serving as a reminder of the message of exclusion and intimidation delivered to people of color throughout the 1900s-1960s under Jim Crow. This is how students, educators, parents, and alumni of color feel at Franklin County High School in Winchester, Tennessee. To further understand the continued controversy and debate regarding the on-going use of the Rebel mascot in Franklin County, in addition to learning ideas for advocacy, keep reading the full newsletter article on our website.

With the growing racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in the United States, there is a call for continued social justice education and advocacy (Cook et al., 2019). In particular, the use of culturally insensitive and oppressive school mascots has gained attention as of late. Perhaps one of the most controversial school mascots is the Confederate Rebel. While many schools have eliminated the use of the Confederate Rebel mascot, over 100 schools continue to use this antiquated and exclusionary symbol which was mostly adopted as a means of harassment and intimidation following the Civil War in 1865, during the early to mid-1900s with Jim Crow laws mandating racial segregation, and during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 70s (Gershenhorn & Jones, 2020; Lineberry, 2019; Shockley, 2016). Such allegiance to the Lost Cause, an attempt to revise the narrative of the U.S. slave history and Confederacy in a positive light, only serves as a reminder of racism and oppression deeply embedded in our institutions, policies, and schools (Boyce, 2018). The repeated dismissal of all school stakeholder’s voices regarding such discriminatory practices allows for overt and covert support and continuation of systemic racism and oppression.

Franklin County, Tennessee has a clear identity associated with the Confederacy and secession. In fact, the county threatened to secede from Tennessee to Alabama if the state did not leave the Union complete with a historic marker noting this fact in the downtown Winchester area. The pride associated with being aligned with the Confederacy and resistance to civil rights for black citizens continued well after the Civil War. The state passed and implemented several policies supporting Jim Crow and racial segregation including school settings. The high school opened in 1950, adopting the Rebel moniker along with the Confederate flag and *Dixie* as the school fight song. The utilization of such mascots and symbols along with monuments commemorating all things Confederate were seen throughout the country, especially in the south, during this time as a reminder of white supremacy and allegiance to the Confederacy. Even after the decision to desegregate schools by Brown vs. the Board of Education, it took Franklin County 10 years to adhere to the judgment in 1964 following a lawsuit. The Rebel mascot has been involved in controversy for some time in Franklin County with a call to change the mascot in the early 1990s. While the Confederate flag was banned from school events, the mascot remained. The debate resurfaced when the high school relocated to a new building in 2004. Again, the decision was made to keep the Rebel mascot along with a school crest prominently featuring aspects of the Confederate flag. Following the racial unrest regarding to the death of George Floyd during the summer of 2020, the debate was once again raised with an official request to rename the mascot. Many cases were made on both sides, petitions were signed, and meetings were held to discuss the mascot. In October, the school board voted 5-3 in favor of retaining the Rebel mascot. Coincidently, a commission approved by the mayor and county clerk proposed a resolution with an 11-1 vote in September to “suggest and urge that the School Board of Education retain the name “Rebels” for the Franklin County High School athletic teams” clearly implicating the political nature of this debate for the county. Despite the fact that the Rebel mascot continues to be a painful reminder of the oppression and exclusion for people of color throughout the history of Franklin County High School, it survives with overwhelming support.

Regardless of these setbacks, the advocacy for the transition to a more inclusive mascot persists. Educators of color and their allies, including school counselors, social workers, principals, and teachers continue to address and advocate for cultural awareness and sensitivity in the high school and community setting every day. They work with elementary students who are concerned about attending the high school and tell them, “They care more about a cartoon mascot than my feelings.” They work with black high school athletes who are mocked by rival schools for “running for ‘massa.” They work with parents of color who choose to send their children to different schools because of the stigma and message of the mascot. They work with colleagues and students who question if they are accepted and their voices heard in the community. The help them process comments on social media about the topic telling them to “get over it”, “stop being such a snowflake”, “if you don’t like it, just leave”, and that they are “just a bunch of woke crybabies.” They have to combat the arguments of the mascot representing history and heritage. History and heritage inextricably linked to slavery, oppression, exclusion, and intimidation.

Although, painful and difficult, these interactions and continued advocacy are absolutely vital in assisting Franklin County High School and the community in building a more equitable, inclusive, and engaging environment to enhance growth-fostering mutually empathic relationships. It is up to all members of the school and community to address such concerns to ensure all students are provided with an environment where they can maximize their educational, social, personal, and cultural potential (Singh et al., 2010). The creation of such settings and experiences is paramount in reducing the negative impact of oppression on marginalized students and improving access to quality educational services (Novakovic, et al., 2020).

The march towards social justice continues for the advocates in Franklin County and beyond. Fortunately, they are not alone. A recent lawsuit has been filed against the county alleging the continued use of the Rebel mascot as a discriminatory educational practice. Continued support can also come from professional organizations like TSCA, TEA, and TPA, university education training programs, and social justice allies throughout the state who can share their voices. The charge to adopt a more inclusive and culturally respectful mascot will not subside until all students at Franklin County High School can learn about the atrocities of slavery, injustices of the civil rights movement, and movement toward ending systemic racism without suffering the additional humiliation, indignity, and disrespect of the Rebel mascot.

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