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## For students of Unity Reed High School, the name change is just a start

More funding, resources sought for aging schools

By Angela Roberts Special to the Times

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Shane Goodson, left, Eric Sledge, center, and Nash McCarthy, all current and former students of what is now Unity Reed High School, in front of the school last week.

Delia Engstrom

In the three years Shane Goodson has attended what is now Unity Reed High School, the irony that the school was named for a Confederate general wasn't lost on him: Goodson is biracial and far more of his classmates are Black, Hispanic or Asian than are white.

“The county has to realize that this conversation, that these actions, don’t stop with the name change,” said Kimberly Elias, who graduated last year. “They start with it.”



Current students and a recent alum of what is now Unity Reed High School beside a rock in front of the school painted with "welcome" in many languages. From left: Eric Sledge, Nash McCarthy and Shane Goodson.

Delia Engstrom

## ‘Fed up’

When Allina Mbuko started ninth grade at Stonewall Jackson High after attending Gainesville Middle, it didn’t take her too long to pick up on how the two schools were different.

At Gainesville Middle, Mbuko said, classrooms had iPads and computers and the library’s shelves were stacked with books. But at Stonewall, the laptops sometimes didn’t work, and the library wasn’t completely filled.

“It’s just a big jump,” said Mbuko, a rising senior. “You see all the other high schools in the county, and it’s kinda like, ‘You guys can get this, but we can’t even get [new] computers, we can’t even get [new] books.’”

There's been some progress lately, Mbuko's classmate, Nash McCarthy, acknowledged, pointing to the recent overhaul of the school's football field. But in his remarks to the school board last week, McCarthy pushed officials to continue renovating the building's aging infrastructure— including its ancient bleachers and frequently malfunctioning gymnasium scoreboard.

With the name change, McCarthy asked school board members, will students receive new materials to better their education? Or, will the old materials simply be painted over with a new name and called new?

“This renaming effort is based in ridding our county of racism and inequality, and it is time,” said McCarthy, who helps Mbuko lead the school's Student Activities Leadership Council. “This is a chance to turn over a new leaf for this school, community and county. Please do not limit the progress to just words and symbols.”

The school board has yet to discuss how much changing the schools' names will cost, or where these funds will come from, but Lateef has promised that no money will be directed away from any of the projects currently planned for Unity Reed High School -- including \$1.6 million in upgrades to the stadium's lighting and concession building and \$1 million in renovations to the school's office area.

Additionally, the board voted in May to direct additional funding toward schools with economically disadvantaged students. This falls in line with a resolution the board passed last year when it approved the new high school boundaries. However, math teacher Charles Ronco said he is still waiting for the board to direct more money toward older schools — another aspect of the resolution, which he helped write.

Down the road, Ronco said, he also hopes the school board might consider allocating more funds to Unity Reed High School that would otherwise be brought in by an activities booster club, something the school does not have.

“As we approach the next budget season — which always comes too fast — we need to make sure we do our very best to level the playing fields, plural, with our most needy of students and most needy of schools,” Ronco said.

But some students say the school can't wait until the next budget cycle to receive more funding. Ritvik Thakur, a rising senior, started a **GoFundMe** on Thursday, June 25, to raise money for much needed renovations at the school. As of Thursday, July 2, he had raised \$3,340.



That's really when the weight of the school's name really hit her, she said. And now, she wants the conversation about the history of slavery in the U.S., and how racism continues to shape the country, even earlier.

"There's a lot of stuff that just gets thrown under the rug about history that we're just going to grow up not knowing," said Vick, a rising junior at Unity Reed. "Society would change so much if we actually learned about it deeply from when we were young."

Other students echoed Vick's sentiments. Beyond curricula for history classes, alum Lubna Azmi asserted that lessons on anti-racism should be embedded in courses from science to English literature.

Over the past year, a commission charged by Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam has been reviewing the instructional practices and resources currently used to teach African American history in the commonwealth. According to the executive order Northam issued to create the committee, it is due to issue a report by September of this year.

And earlier this month, Superintendent Steve Walts announced his plans for combating racism in the district. Besides urging the school board to change the names of the Stonewall schools, Walts said he would ban flying and wearing of the Confederate Flag on school grounds and establish a committee to review the school's relationship with the county police department.

Vick also expressed hope that the name change would serve as a fresh start for the high school and improve its reputation.

"It's funny because the bad reputation comes from everyone who doesn't go there," she said. "If you ask any [student], no matter what skin color, no matter ... if they take more advanced classes or less advanced, most students have a very good experience there."

Eric Sledge, who graduated this year, said he's hopeful. He lives in Sheffield Manor, a neighborhood that was rezoned for Gainesville High School last year. But even before the boundary change, Sledge said lots of students in Sheffield would transfer to different high schools so that they wouldn't have to attend the former Stonewall.

After the school's name changes, though, Sledge said he believes more students may choose to come to Unity Reed.

On the fundraiser's webpage, Thakur includes a long list of problems students identified at the aging school. For one, the heating and cooling systems are unreliable and air flows so loudly through some classrooms that students can't hear, he writes. Classrooms have mismatched desks, and students in the marching band and on athletic teams wear old and damaged uniforms.

When students attend an older school, they may feel like they're not getting the best quality of education, even though the school's faculty and staff is excellent. This might affect their ability to achieve academically, Thakur said.

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"When the technology is working and the school looks nice, you feel good and you're able to fully work to the best of your abilities," he said.

Lori Sterne, an English teacher at the school, expressed pride in the way her students have stepped up to call for change at their school.

"A lot of our extracurriculars have suffered as far as funding for nice new things. And that over the years sends a message that you're not important," she said. "And they are fed up."

### **Changing lessons**

Growing up, Sydney Vick said she didn't think too much about the history behind the names of the middle school and high school she would attend. But in seventh grade, as she and her classmates learned about the Civil War, a discussion broke out over whether Stonewall Middle should be named for someone who fought for the perpetuity of slavery.

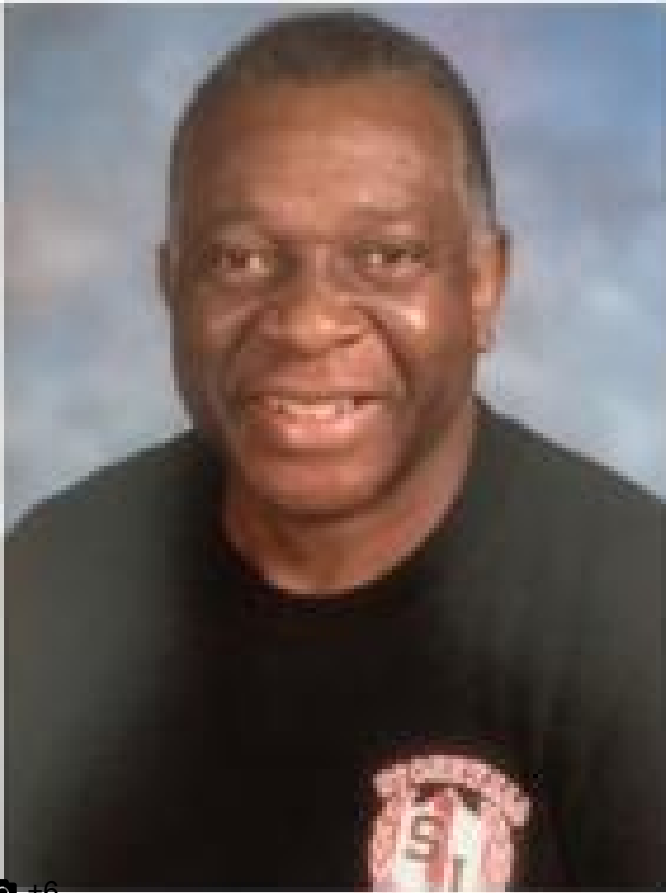
“It’s really just eye-opening. That’s the one way I could put it,” he said. “You’re getting a better education is the way I see it. You’re not just surrounded by people that are exactly like you.”

That’s something that won’t change when the school’s name does, Ronco said.

“No matter what the name of the school is, it’s still gonna be the same community,” he said. “And I’m damn proud to be part of it.”



School board picks 'unity,' local Black heroes' names for Stonewall schools



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'An honor well deserved!': Family, friends reflect on 'Unity' schools' new namesakes

Still, when he'd talk about the school's name with his friends, they always reached a consensus: So many students had already filtered through the school and graduated with "Stonewall Jackson High School" written on their diplomas. Why would the name change now?

"We just kind of had that mindset of, we're just kids in a world run by adults," said Goodson, a rising senior. "What could we do?"

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But after nearly 50 years, both Stonewall Jackson High School and Stonewall Middle School were renamed after just one week of meetings. **The Prince William County School Board on Monday picked new names for the schools – Unity Reed High School and Unity Braxton Middle** -- after soliciting feedback and suggestions from the community in two virtual town halls.

High school students, teachers and alumni interviewed prior to the school board's vote greeted the decision to rename their school with both relief and approval, but few said they were surprised. Given the surging movement against systemic racism and police brutality, some said the name changes seemed almost inevitable.

Now, however, they are calling for the school board to do more than just give the high school a new name but to also follow through on earlier promises to allocate more funding to renovate its aging facilities and provide more resources to students who have long felt neglected.

Students say the request should take on greater urgency since it comes in the wake of the school board's vote last year to redraw attendance boundaries to prepare for the opening of Gainesville High School in the fall of 2021. The board's boundary plan will increase the share of students at Unity Reed High School who are economically disadvantaged, English language learners and minorities.



“I think it will have a positive impact on students,” he said. “I think that they may feel more welcome to the school they’re going to; grades may increase, [students] may have more school spirit.”

### **The same community**

On June 19, a small group of protesters gathered outside of what is now Unity Reed High School for about two hours, waving signs with phrases like “Save History” and “Save Stonewall.” They had come together to stand against the renaming of the school.

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Azmi, who graduated last year, acknowledged their resistance, noting that they likely hold the name of the school to the memories they made there. But after the name is changed, the school, its faculty and programs will remain the same.

“The name doesn’t make us,” Azmi said. “If anything, it’s the antithesis of what we are.”

The strength of the high school is one and the same with the diversity of its student body, Azmi said. Other students agreed, describing the mural of a tree painted in one hallway, which has leaves resembling countries from around the world. Portraits of Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez and Frida Kahlo can also be seen around the school.

Goodson says attending the school has had an incredible impact on him. From day one of his freshman year, he said he was inspired by the efforts of upperclassmen to make the community a better place. And having classmates who come from such different backgrounds from his has only added to his experience, he said.