

Alexandria turns controversy into opportunity by teaching students the racist history behind school names

By **Hannah Natanson**

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On a recent Wednesday morning, Andrea Houston greeted her fourth-graders with a question.

“Have you guys,” she asked the roughly 20 9- and 10-year-olds gathered on Zoom, “heard the buzz in Alexandria City Public Schools?”

Two boys’ hands shot up. One mentioned signs he’d seen on neighbors’ lawns, something about “Rename TC Now” — a reference to T.C. Williams High School, Alexandria’s only public high school. Another boy bounced up and down in his eagerness to speak, until Houston called on him.

“They want to change T.C. and Matthew Maury [Elementary School]’s name,” sandy-haired Garrett Wright said in a rush. “Because they were both Confederate generals. I think.”

Houston nodded. Both boys were right, she said: Some in Alexandria are calling on school officials to re-christen T.C. Williams, named for Thomas Chambliss Williams, a segregationist former superintendent who fought to keep Black and White children learning separately. Some also want to rename Matthew Maury Elementary School, whose title honors a naval officer, oceanographer and astronomer who fought on the side of the Confederacy in the Civil War.

Matthew Maury Elementary is where Houston teaches — “*We* are the hot topic right now, my friends,” she told the class — and so, for the next 45 minutes, she would teach the class everything they needed to know about Maury. The lesson on Maury, developed over the summer and into the early fall by a specially convened group of administrators and teachers, is part of a broader “Identity Project” that the Alexandria school system launched in the wake of nationwide protests over George Floyd’s police killing.

The project — which also involves “community conversations” about Alexandria’s history of school desegregation — came as a direct response to community petitions demanding name changes for T.C. Williams and Maury Elementary, both started around the time of the Floyd demonstrations. In addition to the classes at Maury Elementary, Alexandria has rolled out lessons at the high school level that cover the personal history of Superintendent T.C. Williams.

And officials hope to soon offer classes on the topic to all middle-schoolers, said Sarah Whelan, an instructional specialist for social studies who was instrumental in developing the new courses.

“We are trying to make sure that our curriculum is more inclusive,” Whelan said. “That it provides an accurate and full perspective of history and tells some stories that have not been included.”

Although they would learn together, Houston told the class that day, each fourth-grader would decide on their own whether they think Maury is “a fitting representative of the school community” as it exists today. For the duration of the lesson, she would refrain from sharing her own views.

“No he isn’t!” interrupted one student, although another quickly fired back.

“Yes he is,” the second boy said. “He laid the first telegraph cable on the ocean floor!”

The debate over renaming playing out in Alexandria mirrors conversations taking place throughout the nation, but especially in the South and Virginia, which has the second-highest number of schools — 24 — named for men with links to the Confederacy, according to an analysis by Education Week. Most of these schools were christened for Confederate heroes in the 1950s and 1960s, as an angry White response to the seminal Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, which mandated desegregation of public schools.

In recent months, many Southern schools have dropped Confederate names, spurred by an outpouring of protest from parents, students and alumni. The trend has come to Virginia, too: Prince William County renamed Stonewall Middle School — a tribute to Confederate Gen. Stonewall Jackson — for Celestine and Carroll Braxton, a local Black couple active in the quest for civil rights. In July, Fairfax County renamed Robert E. Lee High School, one of its most diverse schools, for the late congressman from Georgia John Lewis.

But the process in Alexandria has moved more slowly. The school board agreed over the summer to consider renaming T.C. Williams and Maury Elementary and is slated to vote on renaming both schools at a meeting in late November.

In the meantime, officials are proceeding with the Identity Project. The slow pace has frustrated some advocates of renaming in Alexandria, but Whelan said she thinks it’s good to take time and make sure children — and their parents — understand what’s going on and the history at play.

“I also think it builds curiosity and the need to look more critically and engage in dialogue and listen to others’ perspectives,” Whelan said. “The goal is not to convince students of a particular position, it’s to provide them information so they can make their own decision.”

Aaliyah Royster, a sophomore at T.C. Williams who is taking a class that in part focuses on the history of the man her high school is named for, said she had no idea who Williams was before this semester. She never even thought about it.

Now, though, she has learned that “he really, really promoted separating Black and White students,” said Aaliyah, who is Black. Williams, who served as Alexandria’s superintendent from the 1930s to the 1960s, ferociously resisted integration, argued that Black and White children learn differently and fired a Black cafeteria worker when she joined an NAACP lawsuit compelling the school system to end segregation.

Her newly acquired knowledge makes her feel a bit “uncomfortable” at school, Aaliyah said.

But she’d rather know about Williams, and feel icky, than continue obliviously.

“It’s better to be informed,” Aaliyah said. “Maybe Alexandria isn’t as liberal and progressive as we thought it was. Being a bit uncomfortable may not be what people want, but I think it’s necessary in order to move forward as a community.”

Houston, the fourth-grade teacher, was a little concerned ahead of her first lesson on Maury, precisely because the topic tends to generate strong feelings and at times awkward discussions. She was most worried about pushback from parents — but discovered that many mothers and fathers are supportive, with one dad even emailing to thank her for handling a sensitive issue so well.

She has been careful to proceed deliberately and remain open to all perspectives. She asked the class to watch a 3 minute 41 second video about Matthew Maury, produced by Alexandria school officials, and jot down notes. The video explains his accomplishments, including how he helped make the sea safer for navigation, but also less positive aspects of his past, such as his service in the Confederate army — where he found ways to boost the effectiveness of underwater torpedoes.

“After the war, Maury left England for Mexico,” the video states. “He tried to persuade other former Confederates, including Robert E. Lee, to immigrate to Mexico and form a new Virginia that would salvage the attributes of the South’s plantation society, especially the exploitation of unfree, non-White labor.”

After the video, Houston asked the children to share what they had learned, in preparation for an upcoming homework assignment in which they would argue for or against changing the name of Maury Elementary.

Someone noted he “had a lot of jobs.” Another agreed: “Too many.” Someone else pointed out he was an oceanographer, and still another student mentioned his development of underwater torpedoes.

Kaelyn Stewart, who is 9 years old and Black, waited a few minutes before responding.

“He didn’t want to end segregation,” she finally messaged the class. “He thought we learned differently.”

In an interview later, Kaelyn said the lesson made her feel bad because previous teachers — in kindergarten and second grade — had always portrayed Maury as such a good person.

“It’s just not fair that kids have to walk in the hallway, Black kids especially, of a school named after somebody who just wasn’t great to them in the past,” she said. She would like to see the school renamed for Harriet Tubman, or maybe Barack or Michelle Obama.

But the lesson also made her feel good, Kaelyn said. For one, she enjoyed developing her own opinion about her past and present and the place she goes to school. And she thinks everybody in America needs to learn history.

“Sometimes our history is good, sometimes it’s not so good, but it’s just the world we live in,” Kaelyn said. But “if you don’t know history, you don’t know if something ever happened before.”

What she wants to do next, the 9-year-old said, is learn a lot more.