



## Douglas S. Freeman High School

8701 Three Chopt Rd. | Henrico, VA 23229

August 6, 2020

Freeman Family,

Earlier this summer, we [asked](#) the Freeman community if our school's mascot/nickname, the "Rebels" matched our core values as an institution. We announced a [timeline](#) to which we have remained true, until now.

Following several months of [listening, dialogue](#), and careful reflection with the help of a thoughtful and passionate [committee](#), there is no need to wait. It is clear that now is the time to retire the "Rebels" mascot, to leave it as a part of our history and not carry it into our future. We will adopt a new symbol that better represents our school as a forward-thinking, inclusive, welcoming place for all students.

The purpose of a school's mascot is to unify the community and reinforce positive school culture for the entire student body. It has become very clear that "Rebels" is no longer capable of serving that function for Freeman High School. By evolving to a new school mascot and nickname, we will become an even stronger Freeman Family, and we will be asking for your support as we make that transition, both in choosing our new mascot, and supporting inclusivity and innovation at Freeman for years to come through the development of the [Freeman Forward Fund](#).

I love Freeman, and this summer has made it clear that the Freeman Family feels the same way. I have been both amazed and grateful for the level of engagement from our community as we worked through this decision. The school pride and sense of family at Freeman is palpable and something we should be proud of. Pride in anything, however, can become complacency — resting where we are instead of striving for what we can be. As a school, we are predicated on the idea that people can learn and grow. Through careful study of the past, listening to one another, and honest, well-intentioned dialogue, it is clear that we are at a moment where we can grow and evolve as a school, and we must take that opportunity.

### **We arrived at this decision for several reasons and after spending the summer intently listening.**

We engaged with more than 2,000 communications, including 1,500 official responses to our [freemanmascot.info](#) request form. We reviewed hundreds of emails, probably thousands of Facebook and Instagram posts, handwritten notes, voicemails, voice recordings, and several well-produced videos. We hosted and listened to a thoughtful and respectful panel discussion on the topic by members of the Freeman Family, who represented many of the varied views of our community. Our esteemed and thoughtful mascot committee met several times over the past month, spending hours discussing, debating, listening, sharing stories, and challenging each other's views.

### **This decision is informed by what we learned from this process.**

We learned that of those formal responses, only 34% advocated for keeping the “Rebels” name. Conversely, 60% wrote to urge us to adopt a new school nickname. Sixty-three thoughtful respondents, or 4%, wrote to share that they were undecided. The most common theme from those undecided respondents was that, while they saw value in keeping the name, if others found it offensive it should be changed. A majority of alumni who responded support changing the name, as do an overwhelming majority of both the faculty and the mascot committee itself. This was not intended to be a popular vote, but if it were, the decision would be just as clear.

Beyond the numbers, we read thoughtful narratives like [this one](#), from individuals affected negatively by our school-sanctioned mascot. Personally, the thought of putting someone else through this is not something I think we can live with. We know that actions do not have to have malicious *intent* to have a painful *impact*, but at this point ignoring stories like that would have to be an intentional act, and willfully wrong. Author and speaker Glenn E. Singleton recounted a time during a training session concerning courageous conversations about race. A participant told Mr. Singleton that she wanted to be anti-racist, but didn’t know how, and asked what her first step should be. Mr. Singleton’s reply as an African-American man: “*Just believe me.*” If we truly want to build a school that is welcoming and inclusive for all, and we hear stories like the one linked above, it seems that we are faced with two options: The first option ignores or discounts the perspective of a group that has been marginalized in our country and community for centuries. The other *believes* our classmates, colleagues, neighbors, students and friends and responds accordingly. The term Rebel is unwelcoming to some, offensive to many, projects an image to the external community that we promote the ideals of the Confederacy, and creates internal conflict in many who attend and work at DSF who love the school but reject the historical references of the name that represents it.

### **This discussion involved our history...**

We talked a lot about history and discussed the original meaning of “Rebels,” a reference to a group who fought against Americans for reasons that included the right to own slaves. Through this process, we were reminded that this name was chosen for an all-white high school founded in 1954 (the same year that *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled segregated schools unconstitutional) situated in the suburbs of the former capital of the Confederacy during a time of national debate around segregation and Civil Rights. Freeman remained a segregated school for more than a decade after that court ruling and the Confederate imagery remained a part of Freeman’s culture well into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

These elements of our school’s culture are a part of our past. We do not wish to erase them from our history, but we do wish to learn from them. This is also true of the fond memories that our students, staff and community members feel for DSF. Rebels was a word that many associated with those fond memories. This decision should not affect those moments or your view of them. Those positive memories were much more likely the result of good friends, strong teachers and fun classes, not the word on the sign in the background.

Many current students shared that they saw nothing linking the name to the Confederacy and viewed the mascot name as something completely different and positive. This is a testament to the work to reframe the name by my predecessors, and we heard many responses, particularly students, whose perspective allows them to feel no connection between the 2020 Freeman Rebels and the Confederacy or the segregationists of the 1950s. The issue is that many individuals of all races, ages, and backgrounds in our community do see that reasonable link. To ignore it or them would be repeating mistakes of the past and communicating that the Freeman Family is not welcoming to all. It most certainly is.

**...but was focused on our future.**

As we evolve to a new mascot name, we want to focus on Freeman's future.

We want young alumni to unashamedly wear their high school gear when they go to college. We want those that drive by on Three Chopt Road to not wonder if our school is racist. We want every member of our community to proudly cheer the name of our teams from the sidelines without wondering if they are hurting their classmates or betraying their identity. We want to communicate with everything we do, including our symbolism, that we are an inclusive, welcoming community and that the Freeman Family is for everyone.

We recognize that changing a name on a uniform and some signs is just a small step toward becoming a leader in culturally responsive and anti-racist education, but it is a necessary step. We will continue our work on recognizing our own biases, examining and adjusting our curricula to better reflect our community, and working with students to eradicate racism in our school. In fact, we hope that the conversation as to why we must change our school nickname, which is inherently a conversation about perspective and structural racism, accelerates our journey to living up to our ideals around race.

I have a vision for Freeman leading the way, being a beacon for other schools nationally on what a high-achieving, diverse, community-supported, superbly staffed high school is capable of. That must include a focus on equity and anti-racism. We cannot lead in this effort with a mascot that members of our own community tell us is unwelcoming and counter to that vision. Today, we take a step toward fulfilling that vision, but there is much work to be done.

It is important to note that changing a mascot name does not erase history. Our committee spent some time discussing all the signage that would need to be replaced and landed on a discussion of the framed T-shirts that hang on the band room wall. These historical symbols say "Rebels" and they will stay up. Rebels is a part of our past, but it will not be a part of our future. Years from now when new shirts are hung with a different name on them, students might ask why the name changed. We will say that thoughtful people listened to one another, determined that being inclusive and welcoming to all was a core value of our school and that through that listening and dialogue, they evolved and blazed a new trail for DSF.

**Changing the name is a first step, the creation of the Freeman Forward Fund is a next step among many.**

In our conversations with the community, many suggested that the financial investment necessary to replace uniforms and signage could be better used to more directly support efforts to live up those ideals, through investments in programs to build a more inclusive community, scholarships and other supports for traditionally underserved populations. Our response is that we should do both. Our symbolism and actions should align with our intent.

To that end, we are proposing the **creation of a Freeman Forward Fund**. The Henrico Education Foundation is pleased to support the efforts of Freeman students, staff and alumni in creating a more positive, inclusive school community by establishing the Freeman Forward Fund and they are partnering with DSF in this endeavor. In addition to supporting planned spirit-wear gear swap, funds will be used to promote innovation and academic achievement in the school community.

This fund will help support this revitalization of the Freeman Family by flooding the community with new Freeman gear to replace some of the "Rebel" items you have with new ones. Even more so, it will promote programs that drive inclusivity, innovation and academic achievement at DSF for years to come. We thank you, sincerely for

considering a donation to this significant moment in our school's history. Donations may be made through the following link:

**[Donate to the Freeman Forward Fund](#)**

**It's time for a new name and symbolism that match our values.**

The name "Rebel" has served our community in various ways, most recently to represent a value that we should stand up for justice and challenge the status quo, and, for many over the generations, all the good things they remember about DSF. We learned through this process that for many, being a "Rebel" and saying "Go Rebels" stood in to represent the multifaceted good feelings about friends, fond memories, strong teachers, tough classes, and school spirit. We will find another word that stands in those feelings, and the evolution from one word to another will not erase those fond memories for anyone in the Freeman Family.

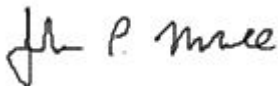
We will work with students, faculty, coaches and much of our existing mascot committee to determine the best symbolism for the future of Freeman High School. The conversations should begin now, but we want to make sure all students have a voice, so much of that work will take place in September when virtual learning begins. We will have a new mascot before students return to our school building and before an athlete wears a uniform. We want students to own our new Freeman identity and for it to have the same unifying, unique, and revolutionary spirit our school does.

**It's also time to heal and unite as a Freeman Family.**

Of course there are some in our community who will be disappointed by this news. I would ask that we all do our best to remember that making this change is not a statement that supporting the Rebel name was a racist act. However, now that this decision has been made the best thing to do for our school and students is to focus all of our energies into reuniting as a family. We have been a model in so many ways for many years, academically, athletically, and this summer, a model for how to have a civil dialogue within our family. It's now time to show the world how a family comes together after an impassioned disagreement. I ask this for the benefit of our students and school. I can think of no better example of putting school over self than rallying behind something even if we disagree with it, because it is better for others. I have complete faith that we will do this well, and emerge as an even stronger and more complete Freeman Family than ever. To see one reason that I believe this, consider [this entry](#) we received from a ninth-grade student on June 16<sup>th</sup>. While this is not an endorsement of a new mascot name, it is evidence to me that the Freeman Family is as strong as ever and capable of unity under any circumstances.

I look forward to this next chapter in our school's history and I thank each of you sincerely for helping us write it.

Respectfully and with many thanks,



John Marshall  
Principal  
Douglas S. Freeman High School