

**PUBLIC HEARING REGARDING RENAMING OF PIONEER ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL**

Monday, November 9, 2020 (6:00 PM)

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this hearing was held at City Hall and electronically while practicing social distancing.

Upon roll being taken, the following persons were present:

Phyllis Byrum, *Chair*
Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck, *Vice Chair*
Karen Jenkins
Lorita Mayo
Tyron Riddick
Sherri Story

Also Present: Dr. John B. Gordon III, *Superintendent*
Wendell M. Waller, *School Board Attorney*
Tarshia L. Gardner, *Clerk*
Keesha L. Hicks, *Deputy Clerk*

Attendance Via Electronic Device: (upon Board approval):¹
David Mitnick

6:00 P.M. – OPENING OF PUBLIC HEARING

The hearing was called to order by Mrs. Byrum, Board Chair.

Meeting Attendance Via Electronic Device (David Mitnick):¹

Attorney Waller read the following motion for Member Mitnick to attend the hearing by electronic device:

A MOTION IS NEEDED PURSUANT TO VIRGINIA CODE SECTION 2.2-3708.2. TO ALLOW BOARD MEMBER DAVID MITNICK TO PARTICIPATE IN TONIGHT'S PUBLIC HEARING OF THE SCHOOL BOARD THROUGH ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION MEANS FROM HIS RESIDENCE DUE TO A TEMPORARY MEDICAL CONDITION THAT PREVENTS HIS PHYSICAL ATTENDANCE AT TONIGHT'S MEETING.

Vice-Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck moved, and Member Jenkins seconded the motion, to approve the attendance by means of electronic device for Member David Mitnick for medical reasons.

Upon a roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 6 Nay: 0 Absent: 0 The motion Passed. 6 to 0.

**There was a pause in the meeting to allow Member Mitnick to join the meeting.*

¹ According to Virginia Code Section 2.2-3708.2(A)(2) requires approval by the public body before a member can participate in a meeting through electronic communication means. The School Board voted to allow Board Member Mitnick to participate via electronic communication means due to a medical condition at the opening of the public hearing at 6:00 p.m. Mr. Mitnick participated in the public hearing remotely from his residence.

Vice-Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck led all in the Pledge of Allegiance.

PUBLIC SPEAKERS:

Letters were submitted and read by the following:

- **Lemuel Copeland** – 1953 graduate of Nansemond County Training School. This graduating class considered to be one of the most accomplished classes in the history of this revered institution. He submitted a document titled “Up From Slavery” which recaps the accomplishments of all 22 members of his class. Nansemond County Training School was the most revered institutions in our community. He indicated that he is not aware of the dynamics of the decision making process involved in the renaming of Nansemond County Training School to Southwestern High School in the early 1960’s however, he felt that the school should have been named Hannibal E. Howell High School. He said while it is not realistic to suggest that PES be renamed to give honor and recognition to Professor Howell or Nansemond County Training School, but he strongly urge the Board to rename PES to SES in recognition of the role it played in the education of African American citizens of Southwestern Suffolk.
- **Joan Knight Marsh** – 1964 last graduating class under the name of Nansemond County Training School. Supports changing the name of PES to SES as this was the request of the Advisory Committee that was appointed at the time PES was being built. The recommendation of the advisory committee and community were ignored and the School Board gave the school its current name. Ms. Knight Marsh indicated that when she was a student at Nansemond County Training School that the students were told that they could chose the new name of their school. However, the names submitted by students were not selected and the “Powers that be” selected Southwestern High School. Ms. Knight Marsh suggesting that Southwestern is the re-named identity of this school in the Holland area and that its name is familiar and historical to the community and is advocating for her and her fellow citizens that the Board change PES to SES.
- **Jennifer McCune** – Opposes changing the name of PES. She is a proud employee of PES and parent of two “Pioneer Mustangs.” She indicated that PES was built to replace two schools not just SES and that Pioneer Elementary represents more than Southwestern. To name the school Southwestern Elementary would ignore students from other localities. PES has been in its place since 2014 and renaming will take away funding that should be used in other areas especially funding Covid mitigation needs as moneys would be re-appropriated to change signage, spirit-wear, and re-branding. She concluded that she takes pride in Pioneer and encouraged the board to NOT change the name of Pioneer Elementary School.
- **Mya Mercer** – Supports the renaming of PES. She stated it is imperative that the Board maintain the integrity of its schools, including the names of local institutions. She said the return of the name encourages the city to remember its educational roots and cultural commitments. She encouraged the school board to do the right thing in this matter.
- **Adrienne Foster** – Graduate of Southwestern. She understands that the community would like to keep the legacy alive but questions why change the name of PES to keep the legacy alive when it is not the same building? She indicated that PES replaced two schools, Robertson and Southwestern and that the name PES should be kept as it is today. She states she is all for keeping history and a legacy alive and suggested honoring Southwestern in a different way and not by changing the name of PES which would affect students who are currently attending.

- **Jessie Daughtrey-Ricks** – Her child attended PES 2015-2019 and she is highly against changing the name of the school. The committee at that time chose the name that was best for the school. She inquired “what will the students who started Pioneer think of their school’s name changing? What will they look back on to show their school spirit and pride if the name is changed?” She questioned why a schools name change is even being considered after seven years of PES. She stated that the school system has far greater things to improve on and spend money on other than rebranding a school that is perfect as is. She said “do not let a small group of individuals change a lifetime of memories for the students who have come and gone as Pioneer Mustangs.”

The following individuals appeared in person and addressed the board:

- **Enoch Copeland** – 1953 graduate of Nansemond County Training School and former School Board Member. Spoke in favor of changing the name of PES to SES. He proposed a school in Whaleyville community. He asked the board to rename PES to SES to make an unjust situation a just situation.
- **Curtis Holland** – 1969 graduate of Southwestern High School. Representing Holland Lodge 256. Spoke in favor of changing the school’s name to preserve the rich history and heritage of Southwestern High School.
- **E. Ricks Copeland** – 1970 honor graduate of FGHS, attended Southwestern Middle School. Puzzling to him why the name of Southwestern was removed in the first place as it is synonymous with greatness. Legacy and success that dates bat to over 90 years.
- **L.G. Howell** – 1956 graduate of Nansemond County Training School (64 years ago). His class was the first class to serve in Southwestern’s building. It didn’t upset him that the school’s name was changed from Nansemond County Training School to Southwestern. His high school diploma means more to him than the others received from VA State U., Hampton U., and NSU. He is asking to the Board to do the right thing and rename PES to what it should have been in the first place, Southwestern Elementary School.
- **Tim Johnson** – Attended FGHS when they first integrated. City Councilman who spoke on behalf of his constituents’ concerns however, he felt that there is something bigger that can be done to preserve the legacy of Nansemond County Training School/Southwestern. He stated that PES was named such because of the bringing together of the various communities. He stated that PES is just a name, if we can remember the past great, but what about the present. There is so much pride in PES he fears would be lost. He stated that if the name change is really what his constituents want, so be it; but Nansemond County Training School is much bigger than this. He said the City still owns the property and there is a lot of things we can do to preserve the legacy.
- **Thelma Hinton** – Former board member, stated that she gave the name of PES and that the committee had to come up with a common ground. Spoke of city council giving “a pool of money to consolidate schools but somebody dropped the ball.” In the spirit of fairness, a neutral name was chosen for PES. She stated to “close it up now is truly unfair.” She stated that something in Holland needs to be named Southwestern but to take the name of PES is just not fair.
- **Harold Faulk** – Second generation from the Southwestern community who started at Robertson then graduated from Southwestern High. Southwestern was the end of the road for your high school education. We continue bringing forth rich heritage for the entire Southwestern community. He stated he is not trying to deny anyone anything,

but the struggles with minority schools are where you're located and lack of funds. His organization represents Whaleyville and Holland. He said Southwestern will continue to be great due to the great people in those communities and how they continue to move Suffolk forward and support education. However, he prays the Board will give consideration to changing the name to continue to promote education in our schools.

Chairwoman Byrum thanked everyone who came out to speak and stated that the Board will take information into consideration.

Member Riddick asked if the Chair if she could recognize those who came to support this effort by standing. Board Chair Byrum recognized those supporting the renaming of PES to stand.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further questions or comments, the Board Chair adjourned the Public Hearing on the Renaming of Pioneer Elementary School on November 9, 2020 at 6:50 p.m.

Phyllis C. Byrum, *School Board Chair*

Tarshia L. Gardner, *School Board Clerk*