



Shrewsbury Public Schools
Shrewsbury High School Mascot Ad Hoc Study Committee
Report to the Shrewsbury School Committee
June 9, 2021

Executive Summary

In November 2020, the Shrewsbury School Committee was presented with an online change.org petition requesting that the Shrewsbury High School mascot, the “Colonial,” be changed due to the perception that it is racially insensitive and that it can be perceived as exclusionary and insulting, particularly due to its association with the concept of “colonialism.” Shortly thereafter, the School Committee received an online change.org counter-petition requesting to keep the Colonial mascot to protect the tradition of the school. In response, the Shrewsbury School Committee charged the Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Joseph M. Sawyer, to form an ad hoc study group to be charged with investigating the origins of the mascot at SHS; learning about the mascot's historical context; soliciting and considering viewpoints regarding how the mascot is perceived currently as a representation of the school community; sharing its findings with the community; and ultimately making a recommendation to the School Committee regarding whether to maintain or change the mascot. This report summarizes the work of the study group regarding the origin of the mascot and its historical context and provides information from a community online exchange on the issue. The members of the study group did not come to consensus on one recommendation for the School Committee, but instead the study group provides arguments for two different options: to either change the nickname and mascot entirely, or to keep the nickname Colonials but update the mascot's presentation. The June 9 presentation of this report to the School Committee made by SHS Principal, Todd Bazydlo, can be viewed [here](#).

Membership of the Study Group

There was significant response to the [call for applications](#) to be part of the mascot study group, with 134 applications. Given the level of interest, the study group was formed initially with eight people from each of the following stakeholder groups: current SHS students, current SHS parents, current SHS faculty/staff, and SHS alumni. The members of the study group at the conclusion of the process were:

Shrewsbury High School Mascot Ad Hoc Study Committee Members		
Name	Shrewsbury High School Graduating Class	Occupation
Current SHS Students		
Omer Alptekin	Class of 2022	SHS Student
Kate Calderwood	Class of 2022	SHS Student
Sophie Chin	Class of 2022	SHS Student
Olivia De Martin	Class of 2022	SHS Student
Suheera Haq	Class of 2022	SHS Student
Gabriel Hurdle	Class of 2021	SHS Student
Ruthu Rakee	Class of 2022	SHS Student
James Riley, Jr.	Class of 2022	SHS Student
SHS Staff		
Todd Bazydlo		Principal, SHS
Matthew Brown		Social Sciences (History) Teacher, SHS
Jay Costa	Class of 1994	Director of Athletics, SHS
Jennifer DiFrancesca		Director of Social Sciences (History), SHS
Brian McCauley		Science Teacher, SHS
Maureen Monopoli	Class of 1995	Assistant Principal, SHS
Jennifer Steinberg		English Teacher, SHS
Current SHS Parents		
Fadi Abdi		Life Sciences Executive
Nur Adam		Human Resources Executive
Nancy Boren Alpersen		Veterinarian
Erin Boucher		Attorney
Kevin Lynch		Manufacturing Executive
Andrew MacIsaac		Marketing Executive & Historian
Ann Sheehy		College Biology Professor
Rishi Vohora		Physician
SHS Alumni		
Caitlyn Burke	Class of 2010	Nonprofit Manager
Shane Flaherty	Class of 2015	Financial Analyst
Kristine Gustafson	Class of 1972	Retired SPS Teacher; VP of Shrewsbury Historical Society
David Kurtz	Class of 1991	Attorney
Kathy McSweeney	Class of 1984	Realtor
Kenneth Mongeon	Class of 1991	Financial Consultant
Peter Mulcahy	Class of 2003	Attorney
Wendy Cong Zhao	Class of 2007	Artist & College Adjunct Lecturer

Meetings of the Study Group

The study group held nine, two-hour meetings via Zoom on the following dates in 2021: January 7, January 21, February 11, March 4, April 8, May 6, May 13, June 1, and June 7. Meetings typically involved small group discussions using “breakout rooms,” sometimes with groups mixed across stakeholder groups and other times with members of a stakeholder group meeting together. Small group discussions were summarized for the larger group. These conversations helped members build their understanding of the topics and other members’ perspectives on the questions before the group.

Study Group Norms and Essential Questions

Shortly after the call for applications went out, it became apparent that members of the Shrewsbury community were using the comment sections of the online petitions and social media to communicate about the mascot debate in ways that were insulting, belittling, and disrespectful. Dr. Sawyer and SHS Principal Todd Bazydlo sent a [message to the community](#) to condemn this behavior and request that the debate be constructive and respectful. This was a key goal of the study group. As its first business, the study group established [a set of group norms](#) that emphasized this approach.

The study group also came to consensus regarding a set of “essential questions” to guide the group’s work, along with definitions in order to work with a common understanding:

SHS Mascot Ad Hoc Study Group Definitions & Essential Questions

Overarching Question:

Should Shrewsbury High School keep or replace its mascot, the *Colonials*?

Definitions

SHS Community: the current students, parents, and staff of Shrewsbury High School

SHS Alumni Community: graduates of Shrewsbury High School, regardless of their current location

Shrewsbury Community: people who currently live or work in the Town of Shrewsbury or who are otherwise closely connected to the town

Mascot: a person, animal, or object that is believed to bring good luck, or one that represents an organization (Cambridge Dictionary)

Nickname: the name officially adopted by that institution for at least the members of its athletic teams. Typically as a matter of engendering school spirit, the institution either officially or unofficially uses this moniker of the institution's athletic teams also as a nickname to refer to people associated with the institution, especially its current students, but also often its alumni, its faculty, and its administration as well. (Wikipedia)

Essential Questions:

- 1) What should a school's mascot represent about that institution and contribute to its culture?
- 2) How is the current *Colonials* mascot perceived in different ways by SHS stakeholders, including students, staff, parents, alumni, and community members? How do perceptions differ within these groups, and how do they differ across groups?
- 3) How do both the historical context and the current perceptions of the *Colonials* fit with the mission and core values of [Shrewsbury High School](#) and the [Shrewsbury Public Schools](#)?
- 4) Is it possible for the *Colonials* mascot to be defined in a way that reflects what a mascot should represent for the Shrewsbury High School community?
- 5) What are the potential impacts of keeping or replacing the mascot in both the short term and long term, including potential impacts on a) the culture, climate, and spirit of the current SHS community; b) the perceptions of SHS alumni and members of the Shrewsbury community; and c) the perceptions of those outside of the Shrewsbury community?

- 6) What are the potential impacts of keeping or replacing the mascot, in both the short term and long term, on the operations and finances of SHS and the school district?

Origin of the Shrewsbury Colonials Mascot

The study group learned the following about the origin of “the Colonial” becoming the mascot, and “the Colonials” becoming the nickname of Shrewsbury High School: Shrewsbury began using the Colonials mascot in the mid-1940s when the high school was known as Major Howard W. Beal Memorial High School and located at the current Beal Early Childhood Center. Prior to that time, yearbooks indicate that informal nicknames for Beal High School athletic teams included *Indians* and *Wearers of the “S”* (see [this link](#) for information compiled by a survey of old SHS yearbooks conducted by a study group member at the Shrewsbury Historical Society). The *Colonials* nickname was created by a Worcester Telegram & Gazette newspaper cartoonist, Al Banx, who gave nicknames to local high school athletic teams in his cartoons. It is believed that the nickname Colonials was in reference to the colonial history of the Town of Shrewsbury, and when the high school had moved to a new building in 1957 (what is now Oak Middle School) it incorporated the Colonial into its official school seal (as stated in this 1965 SHS school “student guidebook” pictured [here](#)). This guidebook artifact indicates that SHS officially connected the Colonial nickname to [General Artemas Ward](#), the Shrewsbury native and lifelong resident who, after serving as an officer in the French & Indian War, was a leader among the American Patriots in Massachusetts in speaking out against British rule. He was selected to lead the Massachusetts militia, which resulted in him becoming the first Commander in Chief of American forces when the Revolutionary War began in 1775. General Ward also served in the Continental Congress and the United States Congress, as a Massachusetts state representative (where he became Speaker of the House), as a judge, and in many local government roles in Shrewsbury.

The mascot study group learned from a local college history professor that the term “Colonials” was not typically used as a noun during the Revolutionary War era, but came into much greater use in the 20th century as a term for American colonists. One hypothesis is that the use of “colonials” as a noun may have been a way to make “colonists” seem more noble as part of the origin story of America, often in ways that were mythologized or romanticized. Some other colleges and high schools also adopted the Colonials nickname in reference to the American colonists who rebelled

against the British, such as [George Washington University](#). Currently, like here in Shrewsbury, George Washington University and other schools have also been petitioned to change the nickname “Colonials” (and some are changing it – see [here](#) and [here](#)) based on the belief that the name represents the harms perpetrated by “colonialism,” particularly “[settler colonialism](#).”

The Colonial logo has depicted a male military leader in a Revolutionary War uniform. As indicated above, a version of this image became the school seal in 1957 and was connected to General Artemas Ward. The Colonials icon has evolved from the original seal, removing the sword and torch and with occasional updates to the rendering of the individual. Here is the current version:



In 2013, the mural shown below was created in the east stairwell at SHS by muralists David Fichter and Joshua Winer. This mural expands the concept of Colonials to include two Massachusetts women from colonial times: [Abigail Adams](#), the Massachusetts native and First Lady of the United States who advocated for equal educational opportunities for females and the abolition of slavery, and [Phillis Wheatley](#), who as an enslaved young woman in Massachusetts became a poet and then the first African American to publish a book, and who also advocated for the eradication of slavery. They are pictured in the mural along with General Ward, a rendering of the Ward House, and a scene of present-day SHS students.



Historical Context of the Mascot

In order to better understand the historical context of the mascot/nickname, the study group reviewed several resources found at the following links that were provided to or by members of the group:

- [The history of colonial-era Shrewsbury and Artemas Ward](#)
- [The history of colonialism/settler colonialism](#)

Discussions among study group members regarding the historical context of the term “colonials” and “colonialism” involved the question of how different people perceive the terms and whether the group of people historically represented as “the Colonials” can be viewed in a positive light because of their collective contributions to fighting for independence from Great Britain in the Revolutionary War and the founding of the United States of America as a democracy, despite the reality that this group of people collectively were also responsible for settling on land taken from Native American indigenous people and enslaving African people (slavery existed across all of Colonial America, including in Massachusetts and in Shrewsbury, although more limited in the northern colonies).

The study group reached out in various ways to history departments of local colleges and universities, and was only able to connect with one professor who provided the group with information about the history of the use of the term “colonials” (as referenced above) and some information about slavery in the 13 Colonies. The study

group also reached out to multiple Native American groups in an effort to invite a representative to speak with the study group, without success.

Presentation by Petitioners

The individuals who sent the petition and counter-petition to the School Committee were invited to make a presentation to the study group so that the study group could better understand their perspectives. Five SHS students who would like to change the mascot made a presentation to the study group and provided additional information in response to questions from group members. The individuals who started the counter petition and who sent the counter petition to the School Committee all declined to make a presentation to the study group.

News Articles Regarding Mascot Controversies

The study group also read [several articles](#) about other educational organizations with the same or similar mascots where there were campaigns to change the mascot. In some of these cases the mascot was changed, in others it was not. Articles about recent changes to Native American school mascots in Massachusetts were also reviewed. These articles provided context to how different communities have reacted to mascot controversies, in the hope that the study group's approach could help the Shrewsbury community to address its own mascot debate in a respectful way.

Over the course of the study group's work, [several articles were published](#) about the mascot controversy in Shrewsbury as well and were shared with the study group.

Feedback Through Community Online Exchange

Some members of the study group felt it was important to have a third party solicit feedback from the stakeholder groups regarding perceptions of the mascot. After an initial engagement with some survey experts did not pan out, in May the school district engaged [ThoughtExchange](#), a company with whom the district previously worked to help create its current strategic plan. ThoughtExchange's methodology is to provide individuals with the opportunity to participate in an exchange of ideas where one can add "thoughts" in response to an open ended question about the topic, and then can see thoughts that others wrote and rate them with one to five stars depending on their level of agreement. Key reasons why ThoughtExchange was chosen was because of its capacity to filter out comments that have language that could be disrespectful or rude for review by a moderator, and the ability for participants to report submissions that they perceive as inappropriate. This was important given the negative issues with

social media and the original online petitions. ThoughtExchange will provide a separate presentation to the School Committee regarding the results*, which can be viewed through [this online report](#) where one can see the top-ranked thoughts. (Note: If filtering the “thoughts” section by demographics, one sees how that demographic *ranked* thoughts; it does not show who *wrote* the thought). This report also includes a “themes” section that categorizes thoughts by the themes of “reasons to keep,” “additional considerations,” and “reasons to change.” By clicking on each of these, the themes are broken down further into several subcategories. In addition, [this slide deck](#) also shows summaries of the “top thoughts” by theme and illustrates how the ThoughtExchange “differences” tool shows thoughts that were ranked similarly high by individuals who are divided as polar opposites on whether to keep or change the mascot, which suggest some areas of potential common ground.

*The link to the video of the June 9 presentation about the data in this exchange by ThoughtExchange co-founder and CEO, Dave MacLeod, can be viewed [here](#).

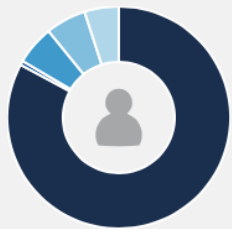
[This two page document](#) providing background about the Colonials mascot and summarizing key reasons given for *changing*, *updating*, or *keeping* the mascot was provided with the link to the exchange as context. The exchange report shows that 2,854 individuals participated in the exchange, sharing 3,543 thoughts and providing 81,825 ratings of others’ thoughts. Participant data, which can also be found at the report link above, was as follows:

Please choose which option best describes you



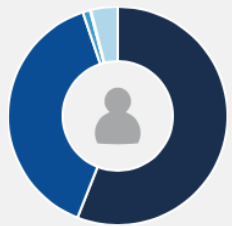
%		
54%	(1496)	Current Shrewsbury student
9%	(256)	Current Shrewsbury staff member
25%	(695)	Parent of a current Shrewsbury student
12%	(343)	None of the above, but a current or past member of the Shrewsbury community

Did you graduate from Shrewsbury High School?



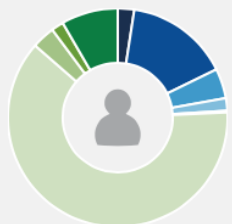
%		
83%	(2303)	No
0%	(17)	Yes, I graduated from SHS before 1970
6%	(158)	Yes, I graduated from SHS in the 1970s or 1980s
6%	(163)	Yes, I graduated from SHS in the 1990s or 2000s
5%	(138)	Yes, I graduated from SHS in 2010 or later

With which gender do you self identify?



%		
56%	(1554)	Female
39%	(1079)	Male
1%	(30)	Non-Binary
0%	(4)	There is no option here that represents me
4%	(109)	Prefer not to answer

How do you self identify?



%		
3%	(67)	African American or Black
15%	(424)	Asian or Pacific Islander
5%	(122)	Hispanic or Latino
2%	(51)	Middle Eastern or North African
0%	(7)	Native American
62%	(1722)	White
3%	(94)	Multi-Race
2%	(50)	Other
8%	(231)	Prefer not to answer

One can see from the study group's separate recommended options later in this report that different members had different takes on how to interpret the ThoughtExchange data. There was some feeling that since a significant majority of thoughts did not favor changing the mascot, that indicates the will of the community and should be followed. There was also some feeling that this situation calls for a values-based recommendation as opposed to a majority rules recommendation, and since there was a significant portion of participants indicating they perceive the mascot as inappropriate, non-representative of all, or sending an insulting or harmful message regarding the values of the school community, it cannot then be unifying. See the arguments in the final sections below for additional information on study group members' perceptions of the data.

The CEO of ThoughtExchange, Dave MacLeod, presented the exchange data to the study group, and he indicated that the members should recognize that the highest rated thoughts were not necessarily the most important thoughts, as the exchange represented a conversation among stakeholders and that the themes demonstrate the values expressed by those who support changing the mascot (such as inclusion of all members of the community by a mascot's representation) and those who support keeping the mascot (such as a strong sense of tradition). Mr. MacLeod suggested it was important to view the debate through a lens of being "hard on the problem and light on the people" by taking an empathetic view of those who support each side of the debate as to their sincere reasons why they hold their opinions.

It should be noted that part of the discussion of what the community exchange demonstrated focused on questions or concerns about what the responses represented. One member expressed concerns that since the way that ThoughtExchange works is to have each separate thought rated by a similar number of participants, the ratings of each individual thought are based on a very small sample size. Some members of the study group also expressed significant concern about the tone of language used in a number of the thoughts that advocated for keeping the mascot, where they perceived comments as aggressive, angry, or expressing that those who support a change should not be part of the community if they prefer a different mascot.

There was further discussion regarding the assumption that changing the mascot would inevitably create division among the community, because a significant majority of those responding to the exchange oppose doing so and many clearly feel very

strongly about it. Some study group members perceived that this is a reason that a total change of the mascot would not be a good option at this time. Others perceived that this rationale would represent maintaining the mascot not on the merits of an argument or on what is best aligned with the school community's stated values, but instead out of concern that those who hold a minority view would be subject to backlash from members of the majority. During the group's discussion of preferences for a recommendation, a student indicated that they were reconsidering their original preference to change the mascot because of their concern that the feedback from many who want to keep the mascot was harsh in tone and indicated a high level of resentment, and that the recommendation should consider the anger that a change would breed. Some adult members of the study group cited this as an example of how students may not disclose their actual discomfort or opposition to the mascot out of fear of bullying or retaliation by those who would be angry over the loss of the mascot, especially in light of the issues that occurred, especially on social media, when the petition to change was presented. Below, in the section for the arguments to change or update the mascot, there are references to this issue of whether keeping the mascot would be an effort to avoid division at the expense of compromising the value of inclusion, or if keeping the Colonials nickname but updating the mascot to be more representative of today's school community is representative of the preference of all stakeholder groups where rankings can be noted when filtering the exchange data, and that the mascot name can be framed more specifically to represent the positive values of the nation's founding while also recognizing the real harms done by "colonialism."

Financial Considerations

Study group members wished to know what costs might be incurred if the mascot were to be changed or updated. It is very important to note that new, additional costs to the school district would be incurred if certain updates were made sooner than they otherwise would be made. If changes were made to the nickname and/or the logo and the changes were phased in over time, a great deal of these costs would be a normal part of each year's normal operating budget of the School Department or the Public Buildings Division or Parks and Recreation Division, or contributions from outside donations (such as the Shrewsbury Athletic Boosters). This would include the ongoing cycle of updating different sports' athletic uniforms every few years (and uniforms are about half of the cost estimate), resurfacing of the basketball court, replacing the turf field surface when needed, etc. The cost for changing the mascot entirely is estimated to range from \$430,000 to \$790,000, but whether these represent *additional* costs would depend on what is replaced and when. These costs would include updating

uniforms, scoreboards, playing surfaces, signage, promotional materials, furniture, letterhead, etc. Changing the Colonials logo but not the name would incur fewer costs; again, if phased in many of these costs would be part of a typical replacement cycle regardless of whether a change was made.

Study Group Recommendations

At the conclusion of its last meeting prior to feedback being gathered through the community exchange, study group members in attendance were asked for the first time to indicate their preference for a recommendation. Of the 31 members of the group, 17 indicated they favored changing the mascot, 12 indicated that they wished to keep the mascot, and two did not make a choice. It is important to note that of the 12 who indicated they favor keeping the mascot, nine of them indicated they also believed the mascot should be updated in some fashion in an effort to make it more inclusive. Further conversation at the subsequent meeting of the group revealed that there would not be consensus regarding a single recommendation to the School Committee, and it was determined that this report would include two options for the School Committee's consideration: to change the mascot, or to keep the name Colonials but to update the presentation of the mascot.

Members of the study group were provided with the opportunity to suggest language to include in this report for both of these options. Language that was submitted by study group members that provides reasons for consideration of each option is included below.

Arguments for the Option to Change the Mascot

This section of the report was written by members of the study group to illustrate their arguments for why they believe the Colonials nickname and mascot should be changed

While The Colonials mascot inspires an undeniable sense of pride in many students and alumni, it also inspires a sense of shame in a smaller group (based on numbers from the ThoughtExchange survey). This shame stems from associating The Colonials with Settler Colonialism in America, which actively removed indigenous peoples from the land that settlers colonized. This mascot can then be seen as a symbol that affirms the removal of Native Americans, and a disregard for people of color - even if it wasn't at all the intent of the original design and hasn't been interpreted negatively for decades.

The mascot is evoking growing discomfort as more students learn of the complex history in the founding of this country. To me, this is a great thing, indicating that our students are educated and can think critically about what is representing all of the student body - not just the majority. A mascot should be an uplifting symbol that everyone can rally behind. The Colonials no longer does its job of uniting our students - made evident by the ongoing mascot debate; it also burdens our young people with controversial history and politics, which certainly doesn't inspire team spirit in those who don The Colonial.

Changing the mascot does not erase local history in any sense, as it doesn't mean that The Colonials never existed. This change does not disrespect The Colonials and the rich history it represents. Rather, this change contributes to local history and its ongoing progress, as an act that pays respect to those who have been erased and ignored since the colonial era. It lets our students know that we share their concerns, and care about those who are still silenced and excluded today.

I believe that a change in both the name and the image - updating one or the other would not completely shed the aforementioned connotations - would be much more reflective of our school's values and the ideals of inclusivity and equal representation that early colonials fought for. The early colonials could certainly still be honored and celebrated, and there are many ways for Colonials to stay active in the community without being the official mascot.

There are, of course, legitimate concerns about a strained budget and the many inconveniences change will cause. But, this change is a symbolic act, and shouldn't be solely examined through a lens of finance and practicality. Perhaps it can be done in phases so as to not exhaust the budget or hurt the students' education. There isn't a rush to get it all done immediately. A symbolic act like this is ultimately priceless, in that it will continue to unite and inspire generations to come.

"Acknowledging our own individual roles and culpability in our settler-colonialist society hurts, but what is worse is denying this fact. When we don't see that, we can't see the real impact of our actions." – Amanda Morris (*What is Settler Colonialism*)

As we consider the essential questions related to the Shrewsbury High School mascot, I think that we must keep that quote in mind. The decision we make is reflective of our

values and not only the community that Shrewsbury is today, but also the one it wants to be. It's one thing to articulate a belief in equity, but if our actions don't reflect that, our values are just words on a page.

The cost projections were high and that is important to consider, especially given the recently passed override. However, if cost is the main barrier in the School Committee's decision, there are ways to mitigate those costs over time, as uniforms and other collateral need to be replaced. Additionally there are opportunities for creativity while addressing each proposed line item. There might even be grant funding available from private, corporate, or community foundations. I think that removing as much of the burden and perceived burden as possible from the taxpayer, will go a long way in mitigating potential backlash related to costs.

Changing a mascot is not an erasure of history, but rather reflects a deeper understanding of a nuanced and complicated, but also violent past. What the colonial might mean to a fourth generation SHS graduate is important, but it doesn't change the fact that the land Shrewsbury sits on was stolen from the Nipmuc people largely following the Pequot War and King Philip's War. Furthermore, it wasn't the colonists as a whole who fought against the British Army during the Revolutionary War, rather a group of colonists referred to as patriots. All that is to say, Shrewsbury, like everywhere else, has had a messy and nuanced past, and if a mascot is to be derived from history, then it should honor those complexities. From the ThoughtExchange it seemed like a source of the pride associated with the Colonial mascot had to do with connections to the Revolutionary period. I think there are ways to get at that root of that pride from that time period in a more inclusive and historically accurate way.

No matter what we end up deciding there will be unhappy people, and some inevitable repercussions. While the blowback from the general community can be expected, I fear for the students who will use these issues as a litmus test. If we deny this movement, what message does that portray to others who are minorities or in other ways may be considered non-normative or non-conformers? To protect those students from further marginalization may make it worthwhile to embrace this change.

School mascots are known to be unifying symbols that not only represent the student body and school staff, but also they are meant to reflect the spirit of the school and the

image the student wants to carry and portray. In many instances these mascots glorify a person or an animal only because such person or animal portrays attributes that the school finds fitting to be represented by. The current SHS mascot controversy is a clear sign the mascot isn't a unifying symbol where both the students and the staff find worthy to glorify and idolize.

It was interesting to me that a group of current students had the courage and the mental awareness to draft a petition and request a change to the mascot (name and icon) because they felt it did not and should not represent them. These students reflect the current thinking of a new generation of young Americans. A generation that is willing to embrace change and inclusivity. A generation that is willing to look at itself and our history and is not afraid to take a stand to call for change. We should reward such courage and not shut down and ignore.

As a community we should see the issue at hand from the viewpoint of these students. We should see their petition as the evolution of our society. We should not see it as a change of the historical aspects or the traditions themselves, but the evolution of both. Cultures evolve through time and this is what we are witnessing today.

We all certainly agree that most cultures have bright and dark moments in their history. We, as Americans, are not an exception. We, certainly, have many aspects of our culture that we are proud of and we celebrate today. We also have many other aspects that we cannot conceive or begin to tolerate today. The historical connection between the Colonialists and slavery as well as with the historical connection with the injustices committed towards the Indigenous people are two aspects of our history that we certainly do not celebrate today to say the least, or let alone would idolize via a mascot. That is the message the group of the students wanted to deliver when they asked for the change of the mascot.

It is to be known, no one is denying that Shrewsbury has a unique connection to General Artemas Ward, and the history of the Colonials. However, we cannot look at this single aspect of our history and say this is good enough for us. We must look at the whole picture and admit that many actions of the Colonialists were a part of the dark history our ancestors endured. That part of our history comes along with many significant and questionable collateral that does not align with or reflect our values today and hence the need for change.

Looking back at our history, [Massachusetts in 1783 was one of the first states to abolish slavery](#). But it took the United States much longer to abolish it nationally. There is always resistance to change even when change is the clear choice. My point here is that cultural evolutions take time and the resistance or the hesitation of some that we

see today is nothing but what I call “the viscosity of change”. Change is never easy, but it is inevitable and hence we should not be afraid of it.

The Colonials are part of Massachusetts tradition and history and will always be. We need to keep in mind the change is not an attempt to change history or walking away from our tradition. The change is more about being cognizant of all aspects of our history and the awareness of the intent versus the impact of these aspects. What might have been acceptable in the past might not be acceptable today. As for the cost concerns, much of it is for recurring items that would be part of the school budget regardless of the change such as the cost of athletic uniforms and other items. Good financial planning and a phased-out process can mitigate any additional costs to minimize SHS budgetary burdens.

The other choice presented was to change the icon of SHS but keep the name of the Colonials. I believe such an argument totally misses the point of the petition. The petition was about the colonials and their history and not necessarily the imagery of the icon. Even though, I believe, if a change is granted, is the gender neutrality of the mascot. A mascot depicted by a white male icon, is not a true representation of SHS where > 50% of students and staff are females. Mascots shouldn't be gender biased. It is our responsibility as parents and educators to help push for equality in all opportunities for females. Moreover, by changing the icon but not the name, are we then endorsing the Colonials connection to slavery and the treatment of the indigenous people? In my view, anything less than changing the name is counterproductive to say the least. Additionally, changing only the icon will still come at a financial cost to the school and will certainly not solve the issue at hand.

One added point is the Thought Exchange survey. One would argue based on the thoughts shared and ranked in the survey, that a change is not supported by most of the community or even the students. However, that would be oversimplifying the whole issue and making it come across as a popularity contest. The question of change was not based on the fact that the majority wants the change. It was based on the fact of the connection of the Colonials to atrocities committed towards the Indigenous people. A fact that few students brought up to everyone's attention and called upon the school to act on it.

As far as students of color, and students who do not identify with the white male that is the current mascot (female students and staff, LGBTQ+ students and staff), the current mascot does not include their identity. It is simple. When the group of students (who

want to change the mascot) who presented to our group did so, they represented the population that is afraid to speak up. These students need to be heard, and should not fear the backlash of their plea.

Unity and community. These concepts, not just the words themselves, frequently arise in discussion of the current SHS mascot. This mascot, The Colonials, can no longer encompass the complexity of unity or community. The name itself is inextricably intertwined with the documented dispossession of Indigenous territory to clear the way for white colonists who supported enslaving Indigenous and African peoples while the iconography of a white male (and we know it is a white male due to the connection to Artemas Ward) no longer represents the rich diversity of the current SHS student body. In fact not only does the current mascot fail to unite it is divisive and suppressive.

Equity is not the same as equality and, as a school district, we have said that we are willing to sit with uncomfortable truths when examining equity within our system. In 2020 an SPS-solicited [Equity Audit](#) was published and although the *ad hoc* committee has never examined this document through the lens of discussions of the mascot, it is an important piece to be considered. One of the most challenging findings reported by the examiners was that **“Minoritized staff, families, and students feeling ostracized, tokenized, judged, or mistreated in relation to their minoritized identities.”** In short, minoritized groups do not feel included in our schools. This feeling of exclusion was well-represented by the student presentation to the *ad hoc* committee in support of changing the mascot. It should also be noted here that the petitioners to keep the mascot never made it a priority to present to the committee. The Equity Audit was solicited, amongst other reasons, to aid in the construction of a 5-year strategic plan for the district. One of the overt articulated priorities of this strategic plan was to attract more diverse families and faculty of color. If, as a community, we cannot even listen to our students calling for a change in a mascot they view as exclusionary, how can we expect to present ourselves as a progressive and inclusive community welcoming the recruitment of diverse faculty? Would a member of a diverse faculty view our school as one that is committed to equity if it clings to “tradition” over inclusion?

Additional aspects of the equity report’s findings relevant to this conversation pertain to the concept of “Deficit Thinking”, defined as “... the challenges students face in their learning are viewed as being solely a direct result of something lacking individually within the student.” Many people in various settings who have argued for retaining the

mascot would like to “educate” around what the Shrewsbury-interpretation of the mascot is. This assumes that individuals who have claimed to be harmed by the current mascot are deficient in their thinking. We must vigorously defend against this type of deficit-oriented strategies for mitigation. This is a prime example of equity detours that SHS has (unintentionally) used in the past that have prevented the district from meaningful progress on a number of fronts and comes perilously close to a “blame-the-victim” argument.

The claim that the current SHS mascot represents the laudable history of colonials who fought against British oppression fails to acknowledge that history in its entirety. As a community we have repeatedly, generously supported education; the valuing of education **is** something that unites us. We cannot then turn away if this intrinsic passion for learning leads us to confront a difficult past. Even if the violent seizing of territories that were inhabited by flourishing Indigenous peoples to initially establish the colonies is set aside, the tradition/history argument is a faulty one if we honestly examine what the colonials fought for. If we use our own Constitution to probe that question further the answer becomes less romanticized. This founding document was signed by white men (there are no women or people of color, immigrant or enslaved, who participated in the drafting, signing or ratification of this document) and an examination of its articles and guaranteed rights reveals a difficult truth: the colonials fought for the right to erect a system in which white male landowners would flourish and thrive, at the expense of all other groups. There is also nothing in the historical record to suggest Artemas Ward, as a trained expert jurist, supported the inclusion of women or people of color. And, it is important to note here that the centering of both the Ward House in Shrewsbury and the impact of Artemas Ward was not established by the town inhabitants but rather by the dogged campaign of Ward family members decades after Artemas Ward’s death. As noted in Rebecca Anne Goetz’s work ([General Artemas Ward: A Forgotten Revolutionary Remembered and Reinvented, 1800-1938](#)),

“After his death, Artemas Ward of the **Seventh Generation** left a sizable bequest to Harvard University. It included five million dollars and title to the Ward family homestead, with a stipulation that the money be used to maintain the homestead as a national memorial museum. Leaving the money to Harvard was a clever choice, for it involved the nation's most prestigious university in a commemoration project to heighten General Ward's national profile and that of the family.”

With the prolific calls for fiscal responsibility seen in the ThoughtExchange survey it does come to mind to inquire how the town (rather than Harvard University as is

currently stipulated) would feel shouldering the full responsibility of upkeep for the Ward home. Thus an examination of history does not support the idea that the colonials represented the best interests of a diverse community.

Finally, the opening statement of Paul Gorski's article, [*Avoiding Racial Equity Detours*](#) reads:

“Students experiencing racism can’t wait for schools to move at their own pace and comfort level.”

To this point, our students have organized, respectfully presented and firmly stated why the Colonial mascot no longer represents the changing student community at SHS and how its usage has actively excluded some students. They have told us, in a variety of ways, loud and clear, they cannot wait any longer for action. Even a cursory look at the shifting demographics over just the last 8 years supports this richer diversity that should not be subsumed under a mascot that, to many in Shrewsbury and beyond, evokes a violent past and does not represent who we are in 2021. We should not be afraid of change and we should not compromise under the banner of civility. We should choose equity over peace. This discussion of the mascot has revealed how the iconography we choose may systemically discriminate against minoritized groups. Our children have recognized this before us; we should be proud. The time has come to center the voices of those hungering for change so that everyone's right, not just those in the majority, to feel not only included but embraced is affirmed. These are our children and our future and we have nurtured them to demand and expect this inclusion.

Arguments for the Option to Update the Mascot

This section of the report was written by members of the study group to illustrate their arguments for why they believe the Colonials nickname should be kept while updating messaging and presentation of the Colonials mascot

We believe keeping the Colonials name with a “rebranding” of the iconography and updated messaging regarding what the nickname represents to the community in 2021 is the best path forward. This path would address the concerns regarding the current iconography of the mascot, which can be perceived as exclusionary, but preserves the Colonials nickname. We maintain that this is the right path forward as it strikes a balance between maintaining the status quo and replacing the mascot.

We believe that it is possible for the Colonials mascot to be defined in a way that reflects what a mascot should represent for the Shrewsbury High School Community. The word Colonial is not the same as the words colonizer or colonialism. With updated messaging, the Colonial nickname can remain in place. There are many positive and admirable qualities associated with the Colonial - fighting for freedom from oppression, perseverance in the face of adversity, strength in unifying for a common purpose. These qualities represent our community and the culture of Shrewsbury High School in 2021.

Additionally, we believe that the Colonials mascot has strong positive ties to the community. Shrewsbury is a town that values its history. The Colonial mascot is a source of pride in the community as it is associated with Artemas Ward and other colonists who fought to establish this great country. It unites past with present. As the feedback from current students, alumni, parents, faculty, and community members overwhelmingly supported keeping the Colonials mascot, we believe that replacing the mascot would have a negative impact on the culture, climate and spirit of the current Shrewsbury High School community.

We are also concerned with the expense of removing the mascot from Shrewsbury High School's uniforms, field, and gym. In light of the success of the recent override, we do not want the community to think that the money from the override will be funding the "rebranding" of the Colonial mascot. If the School Committee votes to "rebrand" the iconography, we believe it should be made clear that the override funds are not going to pay for new uniforms, updates to the new turf field, or replacing gyms floors. The iconography can be phased out over time as things need to be replaced, or a separate fund should be created for this "rebranding" work. All of the override funds should be used for the educational programming promised to the voters and no tax dollars should be allocated toward "rebranding" the mascot.

We maintain that keeping the Colonials name with updated imagery and messaging regarding what the nickname represents to the community in 2021 addresses this issue in a way that reflects the Shrewsbury school community's stated values.

We would like to thank the School Committee and the administration for taking such a comprehensive and thoughtful approach to this issue.

In researching other communities and the impact of changing a mascot, many of the articles pointed to even more divisiveness than before a change was proposed. Many of the thoughts shared during our panel discussion from current students, former students, parents and staff alike spoke about the positive environment at the school. Words like “pride”. “acceptance”. “inclusion” “community” were all mentioned. If this positive environment is happening with the current mascot, it seems like rebranding the image would keep these positive values and experiences in place.

It should be noted that when reviewing thoughts that were rated by current students, the first 150+ highest rated comments were in favor of keeping the current mascot.

We are proud to live in an area that continues to march down the path of positive, progressive changes that leads to greater inclusiveness and equality. We support the idea of changes that bring concrete assistance to our more disenfranchised town members and help to create a better sense of community. However, the proposed change does not appear to be supported by those who are likely most affected: students, and especially students of color.

The ThoughtExchange is not a perfect modality, but it is currently our only way to gain insight into the thoughts of all of our stakeholders. This data indicates that our current student body is quite largely opposed to the idea of a mascot change. Importantly, this trend holds when we look at the non-white response.

When we combine that information with the strong sense of attachment that the overall community appears to have to the mascot, we are left in a scenario where we appear to be doing far more harm than good.

The horrors of our local history are unquestionable - the subjugation and annihilation of native people is a stain on our past that we continue to reckon with. This is undeniable. Yet, in spite of that, those who are closest to this issue feel much more strongly that a change to the Colonials name is not needed. This sentiment will likely continue to

change and evolve over time as march down the path of knowledge and progression, but the stakeholders who stand to gain or lose the most with any change, do not yet appear to support one. Therefore, we should not recommend removal of the Colonial as our mascot.

The Colonial Mascot discussion is not one of cultural appropriation like the ones faced by other school districts. If this were an issue like the use of a Native American image, name, or other representation then I feel that a change in mascot would be justified. Instead, we are dealing with a train of thought that thinks the word “Colonials” is too closely tied to the overt act of “Colonialism”. It is my firm belief that it was never the intent either in the 1940s when the Colonial Mascot first emerged, nor is it the intent today to honor the subjugation of people of any race, nationality, religion, or creed by using the term Colonials.

As was suggested when the argument was first put forth by the proponents of the change, there is some sort of mental gymnastics going on to take a historical character meant to honor the people who advocated and eventually fought for a new form of government based on freedom, liberty and equality and now brand the Colonial Mascot as racist. In fact, quite the opposite is true, it was Colonial Americans, people made up of different races, religions, both men and women and socio-economic status who risked their lives and livelihoods standing up to a great colonial power in the name of independence, liberty and freedom. Were these people, the form of government or the resulting country that was founded perfect, of course not, but what was started here on these shores was unique and an example to the world. The fact that the proponents of the change had the right to bring their concerns to the public square is a prime example of the freedoms we as Americans enjoy and the debt we owe the Colonial Americans.

As we have seen this great American experiment has continued to evolve and grow in its definition of freedom, liberty, and justice for all. And where mistakes were made and wrongs committed the national culture of America has worked to fix, make amends, and create opportunities for those elements of our society that have been neglected in the past. There is still work to be done to live up to the

creed that all men and women are created equal, but there is still inspiration to be found in what the Colonial people in America did. As Martin Luther King said during his I Have a Dream Speech in 1963... “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal’.” In 1964 during a speech in Boston Dr. King said, “It was from these shores that the vision of a new nation conceived in liberty was born, and it must be from these shores that liberty must be preserved.” As his words convey he recognized it was the Colonial Americans that conceived this nation built on the ideals of freedom and liberty.

This vision of liberty that Martin Luther King fought to bring to all Americans, that millions of immigrants have come to this country seeking and that enables all of us to enjoy the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness started with the Colonial people of America. What a Colonial means here in the United States or specifically New England has a resonance that is unique and different than what the term may mean to people in India, Africa, or other parts of the world, and we should take this opportunity to teach future generations about these different cultural experiences, and why we value the term “Colonials” as aspirational and representative of the ideals of this county. If we do move to change the mascot then we are falling victim to “presentism” and abandoning the ideals of the American experiment.

One area I would be open to exploring is changing the image of the Mascot to be more inclusive and multicultural in its representation. Something akin to a group of people representing different ethnicities, races, men and women, etc.

Conclusion

As one can tell from this report, the mascot study group spent a significant amount of time in a good faith effort to meet its charge. While members of the study group ultimately disagreed about what the best pathway forward should be regarding the SHS mascot, the tone and tenor of discussions were respectful and thoughtful and signals that our community can address divisive, emotional issues without rancor. Further, the adult members of the study group frequently recognized how wise and eloquent the student members of the group were throughout the process, and their contributions were particularly appreciated.