



Shrewsbury Public Schools

Joseph M. Sawyer, Ed.D.
Superintendent

June 23, 2021

To: School Committee
From: Joe Sawyer
Re: SHS Colonials Mascot: Recommendation for a Pathway Forward

Introduction:

Last November, the School Committee charged me with forming a study group to examine the question of whether the Shrewsbury High School mascot, the “Colonials,” should be changed. This was in response to the School Committee receiving a petition to change the mascot and a counter-petition to keep it. The charge of the study group included 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.

The study group completed its work and its [report](#) was presented by SHS Principal Todd Bazydlo to the School Committee at your June 9 meeting. Ultimately, the members of the study group did not come to consensus on one recommendation for the School Committee, but instead the study group provided 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. 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.

After the presentation of the report, the School Committee provided two avenues for public comment on the issue, to email the School Committee or to participate in a public hearing at your June 16 meeting. To date, the School Committee has received many emails (about 215 as of this writing), and 10 Shrewsbury community members spoke at the public hearing. Additionally, the School Committee heard the perspectives of three Native American representatives at its June 16 meeting.

The School Committee has indicated that you would take up the matter and decide whether and how to take any action regarding the mascot at your June 23 meeting. As is the case for every potential action you may take, my responsibility as superintendent is to provide you with my perspective and recommendation, which follows.

Context:

The debate about the SHS Colonials mascot, like those in other communities, is fraught with emotion and can create significant discord. When the petitions were first presented, Mr. Bazydlo and I needed to communicate a strong [message](#) to the community after it was clear that some were using the comment sections of the online petitions and social media platforms to communicate about the mascot debate in ways that were insulting, belittling, and disrespectful. I am proud that the members of the study group took a respectful and thoughtful approach to the matter, and that those who have corresponded with the School Committee and who presented at the public hearing have as well. The great majority of submissions in the anonymous online community exchange met expectations for civil discourse; the exchange did include some comments that some may consider harsh but were not considered to be offensive, while others were removed because they were outside the norms of respectful debate (the ThoughtExchange platform was selected in part for its ability to filter and report comments that were out of bounds). I think the district has made it clear that there is no tolerance for nastiness or ad hominem attacks, and the process we followed lowered the temperature after what occurred last fall.

Some of the criticisms of mascot decisions in other communities have been that decisions were made quickly, without adequate time or opportunity for stakeholders to be heard. This criticism will not hold here, as the process we have followed has been thorough, public, and has resulted in a great deal of feedback for the School Committee to consider.

As Mr. Bazydlo and I wrote last fall, a debate about the change of a mascot is always controversial and involves a high level of emotion, as it is deeply connected to both the identity of the organization and the perceptions of individuals who are affiliated with the organization. While there are certainly those who perceive that a school mascot is just not a big deal and that spending time on this topic is unnecessary and counterproductive, I think it is important to recognize that people on both sides of the argument place great importance on the issue, which is underscored by the fact that it has engendered more community engagement and correspondence than just about any other matter that has come before the School Committee (including this year's budget crisis and operational override).

Further, the nature of this particular mascot controversy is not limited to identifying with a community's high school as a student, parent, alum, town resident, or staff member. As one can see from the arguments presented from both sides, the debate about the "Colonials" mascot stirs strong feelings about the specific history of Shrewsbury and its connection to the origin of the United States, which connects to the larger debate in American society regarding how to appropriately reconcile the paradox of the nation's founding – where the ideals of liberty and equality did not apply at that time to Native Americans, African Americans who were enslaved, other people of color, and women, and would not for a very long time. The debate about the "Shrewsbury Colonials" does not exist in a vacuum, and the ongoing debates in society about how to best connect American history with the present day in efforts to seek or prevent change. These issues,

which are complex, are too often reduced to facile concepts that are categorized as “revisionist history,” “political correctness,” “cancel culture,” etc. To a large degree, the debate about the “Colonials” is serving as a proxy for these other controversies that make up the current so-called “culture wars” in American society, and so it is not surprising that it has been polarizing.

Concerns to consider:

Any time that members of our school community raise an issue where they communicate that they feel something is not right, it is our responsibility to pay attention and learn more about why this perception exists. I am grateful and proud that SHS students brought their concerns forward and used the democratic process of petitioning their local government regarding a desired change.

In listening to these students’ perspectives, and reading and hearing additional perspectives from other students and other stakeholders throughout this process, it is concerning to me that some perceive the Colonials mascot in a negative way because of its presumed connection to the harms of “colonialism,” and that *keeping* the name would make some students, alumni, and other community members feel less valued.

In listening to other students’ and stakeholders’ voices who disagree that the Colonials mascot endorses or represents the harms of colonialism, it is concerning to me that they perceive that *changing* the name would make some students, alumni, and other community members feel less valued.

Obviously, the School Committee faces a dilemma, as whatever determination is made will result in some members of our school community feeling less valued. A mascot should be a unifying and uplifting force in a school community, not a divisive or diminishing one.

Another concern that has been raised is the potential cost of changing the mascot. As stewards of the community’s investment in our schools, the School Committee should always consider the financial aspects of any decision it makes. I do believe that the overlapping of this issue with the recent operational override has led to some of the strong feelings conveyed on this issue, and I think it is important to again underscore that no one from the study group, and no correspondence or comments I have seen from proponents for changing the mascot, have suggested that it is perceived as so egregious that the district need shift significant financial resources in order to make an immediate change. If the School Committee determines that the mascot should change, it seems to me that there is consensus that this should be done deliberately, in phases and over time, when costs for new uniforms, signage updates, etc. would be incurred naturally. I hope that this will allay fears that somehow funds that are appropriately earmarked for other educational purposes would be shifted instead to bear the costs of a mascot change. As for those who suggest that if a change is made then many will no longer support the schools in the future at the ballot box or through philanthropic donations, I respectfully suggest that the School Committee make the decision that you believe is the right one based on the merits of the arguments.

Influence of the majority and minority:

Many have suggested that since a clear plurality of those who responded to the online community exchange do not favor a change, the School Committee should cede to the will of the majority. The difference, of course, between direct democracy and representative democracy is that elected representatives must not only consider what is most popular among their constituents, but also consider the perspectives of the minority in deliberating what is in the best interest of the community. Many changes in our society still may not have happened if governmental decisions were based solely on whether a majority of the community agreed, especially those involving advancing the rights or views of a minority. The community should expect its governmental representatives to use their best judgment, not merely vote in alignment with what is perceived as most popular. However, when an issue has a clear majority of a certain opinion within the community, it is also wise for elected officials to consider the reasons why that is, while also taking into consideration the perspectives of those who hold the minority opinion, and then taking all of these considerations into account when deciding the best course of action. I believe that the process our district has followed has allowed both majority and minority opinions on the issue to be clearly heard.

A pathway forward:

The mascot study group's report and the feedback from the community has provided the School Committee with ample information and arguments regarding the different perspectives on the SHS mascot issue. I deeply respect the ways in which most students, parents, alumni, community members, and staff have expressed their opinions, and I believe that these opinions are held sincerely and are well-meaning. I believe our community can be proud of the process that has been followed that has allowed for stakeholders to make their voices heard.

I do not think it necessary to outline the competing arguments again here, as the School Committee is very familiar with them. What I do believe is important in choosing the pathway forward from here is for you to consider the following questions:

- Has it been clearly demonstrated that the "Colonials" mascot should be interpreted in such a way that it can no longer be perceived as a positive representation of the SHS school community?
- Is there a clear difference between demographic groups in how the mascot is perceived and whether change is desired?
- Is there a pathway forward that respects the concerns raised on both sides of the debate?

My perspectives on these questions are as follows:

- *Has it been clearly demonstrated that the "Colonials" mascot should be interpreted in such a way that it can no longer be perceived as a positive representation of the SHS school community?*

- For me, this hinges on the interpretation of the term “Colonials” itself and whether it can be defined in a manner that is not inextricably tied to the negative elements of “colonialism.” I think that important arguments have been made by some on both sides of this issue. The lack of consensus among the members of the study group regarding the interpretation of the origin and the historical context of “Colonials” as Shrewsbury’s mascot is telling. The fact that there is ongoing debate as to whether this nickname represents positive values or is tainted suggests to me that there is an opportunity to create a better, more common understanding regarding what “Shrewsbury Colonials” represents – an understanding that unequivocally rejects the harms of “colonialism.”
- Additionally, an argument many who wish to change the mascot have employed – that using essentially the same mascot with a different name (i.e., “Patriots,” “Minutemen,” or “Revolutionaries”) would be a good alternative – reinforces for me the sense that this may be more of an issue of language than of representation, as referencing the same people but with a different name suggests that concerns are not centered on those individuals’ worthiness to be used as a mascot, but rather on the word chosen to describe them. I believe strongly that language is important, and since there are differing opinions among smart, reasonable people from varied backgrounds on how the name “Colonials” can be defined, I do not believe that it would be prudent to take the more extreme decision of changing the mascot entirely at this time, when an alternative approach could address many of the concerns raised.
- I think many are sensitive to the fact that we have very few Native American members of our community, and so it was very important to hear from the Native American representatives who spoke with you at your last meeting. The perspectives they shared were compelling, and I think illustrated their strong belief as to why using a Native American mascot is considered inappropriate cultural appropriation. Their perspective regarding a non-Native American mascot like “the Colonials” seemed less clear, and other feedback the School Committee has received suggests that there may not be a clear consensus among the Native American community with regard to perceptions of this kind of mascot. I believe this is something to continue exploring going forward.
- *Is there a clear difference between demographic groups in how the mascot is perceived and whether change is desired?*
 - It is especially important to consider what perspectives have been shared by those who identify as Black, Indigenous, or Persons of Color (BIPOC) since there are no district leaders who have been part of this process (including myself), nor are there any School Committee members, who identify as BIPOC. There were multiple members of the study group who identify as BIPOC, and the ThoughtExchange community exchange provided some insight into how different demographic groups rated comments.

- In reviewing the data from the community exchange, letters from stakeholders, and the final positions of the study group members themselves, opinions vary among different demographic groups regarding the interpretation of the “Colonials” mascot and whether a change is warranted. When considering the potential of whether there is a “tyranny of the majority,” it is important to consider whether the majority and minority groups with regard to the opinion they hold differ significantly by certain characteristics (such as race, ethnicity, or gender). While it appears that there is greater representation of BIPOC individuals among the minority of those who wish to change the mascot, the feedback shows that there is a mix of individuals from different demographics who hold different opinions on the issue.
- *Is there a pathway forward that respects the concerns raised on both sides of the debate?*
 - I believe that there is a pathway forward that is respectful of the sincere, strongly held, and differing opinions that have been shared, and that it should be centered on our central purpose: education. One thing that has been made clear through this debate is that we can do a better job of defining why “Colonials” was chosen as the mascot for SHS, the relation between the mascot and its historical origins, and the values it is intended to represent. That is not to say that even if this definition were to be provided, there would not have been (or will not still be) those who believe it should be changed. However, the process the district had gone through suggests to me that being intentional in working with our students and other stakeholders to more closely examine the mascot and its context holds promise for creating a common understanding about what history we honor and, through a critical eye, what history we denounce.
 - Because there is a lack of consensus among the study group members who most closely considered the issue; a clear preference among the large number of stakeholders who have shared their opinions; and disagreements about many of the historical aspects of the debate, it seems wise to keep the “Colonials” name. Choosing a path of greater change when there is not clarity among stakeholders that such a change is warranted would be ill-advised, when a more moderate approach has the potential to succeed at addressing many of the concerns raised, while reinforcing the positive aspects of the existing mascot that many have cited.
 - At the same time, given the concerns raised, I believe that the option advocated by most study group members who believe the name should be kept – to update the presentation of the mascot – is also important to pursue. I suggest an expansive interpretation of “updating the presentation” of the mascot should be used, one that does not only involve consideration of what changes to the iconography of the “Colonials” might be appropriate, but also includes significant efforts to better educate our students and our entire community regarding its historical context, both good and ill. These efforts should be undertaken with the intention of not only clearly defining what the mascot represents for the SHS community, but to further explore

and address concerns about the mascot that have been raised so that there is no mistake about what values the school wants to convey through its “Colonials” nickname.

- If the School Committee endorses this approach, I believe it should be made clear that the process of “updating” should be something that is to be facilitated and coordinated by the SHS administration in a future-focused manner, i.e., that this will not involve immediate changes unless it would be part of what would normally be in the process of being updated. This would mean that there would be no expenses incurred other than those that are a typical part of the school district’s expenditures. Any changes to existing iconography, logos, etc. should be considered over time and any costs managed within the normal budgetary process.
- The “updating of the presentation of the mascot” that SHS will undertake should include varied educational opportunities for our students and our entire community to further grow in understanding of the historical context of the “Colonials” mascot, and SHS should consider ways to partner with the Shrewsbury Historical Society, the Shrewsbury Public Library, Native American organizations, and higher education institutions in these efforts.

Conclusion

No decision in this matter will please everyone. It is clearly a highly polarizing issue. In many cases I expect that the stronger someone feels about the righteousness of their own position (on either side of the debate), the more likely it is that they may view the opposing position as not only unfavorable, but perhaps as unethical, immoral, or as an attack on their own identity.

Further, I believe it is important to recognize that some have articulated their positions in this debate in a manner that suggests they will view whatever action the school district takes (or does not take) as a proxy for the district’s stance on issues of racial equity. There are clearly a range of opinions on this issue, and I do not believe that the district’s work to address racism and equity should be reduced to this particular issue. We should continue to be clear that racism exists within our community and our school district, just as it does in every community and school district, and that we are committed to working to improve our schools where it comes to issues of race, equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging.

Some have suggested that aligning with the clear majority preference is a democratic and fair approach. Others have suggested that, in this case, reflecting the majority view does a disservice to those who hold the minority opinion, since the issue is about values and perceptions of exclusion. Additionally, some have cited an expected high level of anger and dissent from the majority if the mascot were to be changed as a reason to avoid making this change. I believe that this decision should not simply be based on what the majority prefers, nor do I believe that it would be appropriate to make a decision that you would consider in conflict with our school district’s values in order to avoid backlash and “keep the peace.” My recommendation is not based on either of these things.

As you deliberate and decide, I suggest that you consider the School Committee's [Policy on Controversial Issues](#). Through the process we have followed, I believe that our district has honored this policy's statement that students have "the right to share and express their ideas and opinions on controversial issues, and, within a forum of fair and open discussion, grow in their understanding of the difficult and complex problems they face as citizens in today's world." The policy also emphasizes the importance of "encouraging students to search after truth and think for themselves." It is important to promote this approach for our entire community as we go forward. I am hopeful that this process will help all of us grapple with the paradoxes inherent in American history, instill a wariness of romanticizing historical events or figures, and thoughtfully consider the challenges of viewing the past through the lens of present-day beliefs.

As our students and other stakeholders become better educated about the historical context of the "Colonials" mascot, it remains to be seen whether concerns raised by those who advocated for changing the mascot will be ameliorated to a large degree, or whether sentiment to change the mascot might expand. As this unfolds, I believe it will be important that this issue be addressed at the SHS level for at least the next few school years to see if the "update" approach is working for our school community.

Regardless of what decision the School Committee makes, I believe that it is very important to emphasize that this is a complex issue with many nuances, and that reasonable people have different perspectives that should be considered, valued, and respected. While some will be displeased with the outcome no matter what, the school district must continue to approach this topic by modeling civic discourse and promoting empathy for different points of view. I am hopeful that strong disagreements will not lead to unnecessary and damaging divisions.

This is undoubtedly a fraught situation for our community, and choosing what path to pursue is a significant challenge for you, the School Committee. While this is a very difficult decision, I have complete confidence that each of you has given thoughtful consideration to the many aspects of this complex debate, and that whatever approach you take will be based on what you believe is in the best interests of our students, families, alumni, community members, and staff.