



Duval County Public Schools

December 16, 2013, Special Board Meeting

Ms. Becki Couch, Chairman
Ms. Cheryl Grymes, Vice Chairman
Mr. Jason Fischer
Dr. Connie Hall
Mr. Fred "Fel" Lee
Ms. Ashley Smith Juarez
Ms. Paula D. Wright
Dr. Nikolai P. Vitti, Superintendent

ATTENDANCE AT THIS SPECIAL MEETING OF THE DUVAL COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD with Dr. Nikolai Vitti, Superintendent of Schools, Ms. Karen Chastain, Chief of Legal Services, Ms. Becki Couch, Chairman, Ms. Cheryl Grymes, Vice Chair and Board members: Mr. Jason Fischer, Ms. Constance S. Hall, Ms. Ashley Smith Juarez, Mr. Fred "Fel" Lee and Ms. Paula D. Wright, present.

Call Meeting to Order

[1. CALL MEETING TO ORDER - SPECIAL MEETING](#)

Minutes: The Chairman called the Special meeting to order at 5:01 p.m.

[2. INVOCATION](#)

Minutes: *A moment of silence was held.*

[3. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE](#)

[4. COMMENTS FROM AUDIENCE](#)

Minutes:

The following people spoke in support of the name change for Nathan B. Forrest High School:

Mr. George Gillis
Mr. Keith Ivey
Mr. Rodney L. Hurst
Mr. Woodrow Williams
Ms. Cindy Edelman
Mr. Robert Montgomerie
Mr. James Austin
Ms. Kenyatta Malcolm
Mr. George F. Young
Ms. Marcella Washington
Ms. Audrey Moran
Mr. Cleve Warren
Mr. Steven Stoll
Mr. Fernando Figueroa
Mr. Richard Blake

The following people spoke in favor of keeping the school's name as Nathan B. Forrest High School:

Mr. John Edwards
Mr. Timothy Pickering
Mr. Jim Taylor
Mr. David Pickering
Mr. Glen Mallette
Mr. Gary Mallette
Ms. Alexis J. Cluff
Ms. Joan Cooper
Ms. Teresa Cluff
Mr. Keith Spradlin
Mr. Dave Nelson
Ms. Jim Shillinglaw
Mr. Henry Russ

[5. APPROVAL OF THE DECEMBER 16, 2013, AGENDA](#)

Motions:

That the Duval County School Board
approve the December 16, 2013, Agenda
as submitted on December 13, 2013, with
the following changes: - PASS

1.

Vote Results

Motion: Fred Lee

Second: Cheryl Grymes

Rebecca Couch - Aye

Jason Fischer - Aye

Cheryl Grymes - Aye

Connie Hall - Aye

Ashley Juarez - Aye

Fred Lee - Aye

Paula Wright - Aye

General

[RENAMING NATHAN B. FORREST HIGH SCHOOL NO. 241](#)

Minutes:

Speakers:

Dr. Hall said naming or renaming school facilities has a tendency to stir emotions within communities. School Boards across the state and nation are always faced with this issue. Not only for the naming or renaming of a school but auditoriums, athletic fields, media centers, etc. The Duval County Board Policy is in place to address the issue before us tonight. That policy has been brought to you tonight once again. As a Board we hold steadfast to following policy appropriately.

As the Board member for District 5, efforts have been made available to receive and listen to your input as it relates to the renaming of Nathan B. Forrest High School. We value your input, and the time put forth by the community, alumni, students, faculty and staff of Forrest High School. Thank you to the school's principal and administrative team that committed extra time beyond the day to day operation of the school to address this issue. Appreciation is extended to district staff for your time rendered during the engagement process. Thanks to Superintendent Vitti for your Leadership and ability to carry forward the Board Policy as requested.

From time to time, we as Board members are called to engage in issues of our constituents that we represent, that engagement incorporates and models the vision, mission and core values of this school system. Let me review our mission and core values with you:

Mission

To provide educational excellence in every school, in every classroom, for every student, every day.

Core Values

Excellence.

We expect the highest standards throughout our organization from the School Board and Superintendent to the student.

Integrity.

We foster positive relationships based on mutual respect, transparency, honesty, and the consistent demonstration of actions.

Innovation.

We create dynamic systems and processes that solve problems and overcome challenges.

Equity.

We promote an environment that ensures equal opportunity, honors differences, and values diversity.

Collaboration.

We are a community of individuals who share a collective responsibility to achieve our common mission.

Forrest High School was built in 1959 during the era of segregation. As a native of Jacksonville who attended Duval County Public Schools, I could not attend Forrest High School....why? because schools in this system were segregated.

I can best describe this era by using these lines from Charles Dickens, "A Tale of Two Cities" 1859 -- IT WAS the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way- in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

As I fast forward to the 21st century from 1895 to the present:

Jill Berkowicz and Ann Myers on September 26, 2013

Poverty levels are rising, mobility rates increasing, diversity growing, and expectations for all, hoisted. Families are facing more and different challenges. The 1950's family, with a dad who works, a mom who stays home and two children, is now rare. Extended families are across the nation or globe, not across the street. Most of our teachers and leaders received initial training based upon an education system and theory that was grounded in another century.

Our graduation rates and mastery rates have increased. Doesn't that hold out hope? We have maintained and raised those rates in some cases in spite of all those changes that have impacted our systems. We must not allow the rhetoric to influence our continued dedication to educating all the students in our schools. However, we must pay attention.

Tonight I request that the District 5 community and every community across this school district focus your energy through thought, word and deed to assure quality educational opportunities for ALL

- High quality early education
- Equitable funding and resources
- Wraparound academic, social, emotional and health supports for students
- Highly prepared and effective teachers
- Effective school discipline
- Meaningful engagement with parents and the community

All who envision a more just, progressive, and fair society cannot ignore the battle for our district's educational future. Principals fighting for better schools, teachers fighting for better classrooms, students fighting for greater opportunities, parents fighting for a future worthy of their child's promise – their fight is our fight. We must all join in.

Let's do what will keep our schools strong, safe, learning environments that are changing to meet the needs of this century and the children it brings to our doors.

Mr. Superintendent, I support your recommendation.

Ms. Juarez said there have been many claims to characterize this vote. As a result, I know it is important to explain my vote this evening so that no one is left to assume my intent. My vote, tonight, does not reflect judgment of a man. I am not called to judge.

My vote, tonight, honors the voice of students as I always seek to do. The name of the school does not dictate what happens within its walls. It does not solely define its teachers or its students or the community in which it sits. Whether or not the name is changed, the accomplishments of its alumni remain and the future for its students will be determined by the efforts of those young people and the adults and systems that support them.

Still, the name should honor what we seek to do as a school system: to inspire students. To instill in them that their voice matters. When Forrest High School was named 50 years ago, the students' voice was silenced by a special interest.

My vote, tonight, is not in judgment of a man; it is not in response to a petition. It is in honor of the voice of students. Their opinion is clear. While we cannot go back to ask the children who were a part of the student body when the school opened, without years of influence, what they would choose as an appropriate name. We can ask the students today and, while I cannot speak for my fellow board members, that is what I intend to do.

We have much to be proud of as a school system and we have much work to do. My focus is and always has been on building a school system that encourages and inspires all students to reach their potential. If a name is impeding that, it is my charge to

remove that barrier, that distraction and to proceed with the work of academic achievement, creativity and innovation.

I would ask that all who have come forward on this issue, whether for or against a name change, reconcile that we as adults are all responsible for the future of our children and our city. I believe it is time for us to move on from this debate, agreeing to disagree on a name, but standing united for our children.

Ms. Grymes said for me, this decision is not about the name of a school but what it's doing the community of where I was born, where I raised my family and where I have chosen to be a public servant. This is the community that I love. As school board members, our job is to focus on providing educational excellence in every school, every classroom for every student every day. You will hear that repeated over and over because that has really grown to be very dear and close to what we, as board members, believe.

All the decisions I make will be based on that mission because for me, that is and always will be about the children and our schools. I am deeply concerned about the impact this has been on our community. When a disagreement gets to this level of acrimony, it creates divisiveness and it's difficult to overcome. Our community has endured many divisive issues and I have had a front row seat of some of the most contentious and in the end, there are no real winners; bad feelings remain and our community is, once again, divided.

We are at a crossroad with our public education system. I came into this job advocating for reform because throughout my involvement with our public schools over the last 25 years there has been incremental growth that has left many of our children behind. Over the last year, the Board and the Superintendent have been extremely focused on identifying the transformational strategies that will ultimately improve student achievement. In addition, we're committed to helping our students graduate, prepare for success in college, a career and life. In order to be successful, we need the entire community to join us on this journey. We need a united community; a community that is willing to roll up its sleeves and help us in specific ways that will be beneficial to all students. We need a community that is willing to not allow distractions but instead, eliminate those distractions that will take us off track.

If we were to keep the name, this battle would not stop and it would go on and on and once, again, become diversion from our mission. As a leader, it is my responsibility to do what is right for our students. That is my job and for the sake of our children and our community, I, too, am supporting the name change. I thank all of you who have been engaged in this debate and now I encourage you and implore all of you who have been involved to help us move on united in our vision for our children.

Mr. Fischer said my story is the American story. My bloodline traces all the way back to the founding of this country. My great, great, great, great, great grandfather was a lieutenant in Massachusetts Militia and he was a patriot fighting against oppression in this country. I had family members who fought in every single major war on the way. Our family has been refreshed in our American experience by immigrants whether that's my grandfather whose parents were from Venezuela or my wife who is from Singapore or my son, who is subsequently, Asian. My American experience has not been one of a

people who wants to be divided by the color of their skin. We are a people who are united in our community.

I ran for office to focus on the Civil Rights issue of our day which I believe is access to a high quality education for our children. I know that there are alot of people in this room to talk about Forrest and the issues that are going

Ms. Wright said as you've heard, tonight, from some of my colleagues this has been not a difficult task in terms of making a decision but a difficult task in making certain that we reach out and that we are assured that each stakeholder had an opportunity to voice their opinions. We have a duty to serve our school district, our city and our entire community holistically as we have a duty to to educate our students holistically. With the focus on one of our core values - Equity - which is ensure that we provide a learning environment, rich and diverse thoughts and equal opportunity.

Tonights support of the Superintendent's recommendation for me moves our entire city toward emotional, equality, equity and justice. I support the Superintendent's recommendation because it moves not just the school or a school district but our city towards a united community which will enable our students to become a city that not just offers words of unity but shows unity by its actions.

As a student at Joseph Stilwell, the first year of integration in Jacksonville, it was not a pleasant bus ride from my home of Fairfax which I lived less than two blocks from James Weldon Johnson, then junior high school. So, as a student, I understand how we can be held hostages emotionally and interlectually. When we're in a place, in a new environment, when you're questioned, your actions, your intelligence, your words...everything about you is questioned simply because of the color of your skin. I wish that on no other student. I recall at Joseph Stilwell as an 8th grade student in a math class the very first week of school and the teacher gives to all of the students around us, African American students, a 3"x5" index card with her name, her telephone number and the times they could call her. Of course, we didn't receive one; she didn't give a card to us but that is what she said was on it and for her to pass that card to every student in the class but the African American students, has always stayed with me. You know, we talk about what is in a name...a name does matter. It's important because it can serve as the foundation for how we think about ourselves and how involved we become in that particular place. Also, how we prepare ourselves to move beyond that particular place.

Dr. Vitti, I thank you for your leadership; I thank you for the eleven meetings between November 5 - December 16, 2013; and to the community, I thank all of you for your input because we have learned and I will speak for my colleagues on this, a whole lot about Nathan Bedford Forrest, that we did not know before. So, it is important that as a community, that we continue to not just say it but to do it and I ask that as we prepare to vote and leave this place, that we remember that this is our city. These are our students and all of these are our schools. So, let's continue to be respectful and to understand the power of love and how the power of love can transform any situation. Thank you.

Mr. Lee said I think the community has seen this Board this past year to be very deliberate in what it does to think through on the tough issues. We were elected to lead. It's something I recall the Board talking about this past year. We either lead or we follow and this Board chose, time and time again, to lead. I, too, echo my fellow Board members' comments. This is about the students and sometimes you get tired about talking about the adults and we need to be talking about the students.

I am a native of Jacksonville and this is my community. It hurts me deeply to see my community divided, at all, over anything and we've seen that this past year with other issues. I believe in my community. I've spent my time, my effort and my money in this community because I believe in it. One of the things was probably most profound for me when I was thinking through this was I realize a lot of people don't think that Board members read their emails, take phone calls, return phone calls, look at CDs, read books that are given to us, but we do.

I'm going to say a couple of statements that I learned that I'd like to reiterate from Forrest's farewell address to his troops on May 9, 1865:

"Civil War, such as you have just passed through naturally engenders feelings of animosity, hatred and revenge. It is our duty to divest ourselves of all such feelings; and as far as it is in our power to do so, to cultivate friendly feelings towards those with whom we have so long contended, and heretofore, so widely, but honestly, differed."

During his speech to the PoleBearers on July 5, 1875:

"I believe I can exert some influence, and do much to assist the people in strengthening, fraternal relations. and shall do all in my power to elevate every man to depress none."

He also said:

"We have but one flag, one country; let us stand together. We may differ in color, but not in sentiment. Many things have been said about me which are wrong, and which white and black persons here, who stood by me through the war, can contradict. Go to work, be industrious, live honestly and act truly and when you are oppressed, I'll come to your relief."

When we as adults and will we start to act in harmony? There has been much said on both sides. I can tell you, personally, I've looked at all pieces and parts of it. I can find contradictions on both sides and I can find rights on both sides. It's always disconcerting as an elected official and someone who grew up in this community when we start to pull the school system into these types of discussions. These discussions can only harm the public school system and the public school image. All community stakeholders need to start stepping up and take responsibility to sort out these community issues. They impact our students and will impact the public school system. We are about educating children. Without your leadership and full involvement, this system is doomed to fail. I will do my job as a leader, today, and move past this controversy which is dividing my home, but going forward, I am not letting the citizens of Jacksonville off the hook. Solving poverty, crime, racial division and the plethora of issues which affects the children in your public school system every day rests clearly on the shoulders of this community and its stakeholders. It's time for Jacksonville to step

up.

I believe based on what I've read about this gentleman, he would not want his name to be linked to violence. For that, Mr. Superintendent, I will support your recommendation.

Ms. Wright said we're here because the Superintendent's recommendation but I would be remiss if I did not commend Dr. Connie Hall for stepping up to the plate and bringing forth the desire for us to look into the possibility of changing the name. I thank you for your guidance, Dr. Hall. I know that as a Board member, this was not an easy task but you did it and we're here and I think that because of your movement, our city will be forever better. Thank you.

Dr. Vitti said Board members and stakeholders, I just want to make clear with what the recommendation is and the next step. Although the Board policy provides per view to make a recommendation to change a name or not, and if so, request a new name be given, to look at history and understand how the name was given to this school, denying the voice of students at the school, I believe it is important to go back to the students. Even though that voted in the minority not to change the name, to ask them what the new name should be and I believe we can do that by the end of this week. I, also, believe we need to offer the entire community, those closest to Forrest, to ask them what the new name should be. That will then make this process whole and we have engaged, based on policy, on whether the name should change but I do not believe we have engaged the community thoroughly on what the new name should be and I believe that can be done next week, not only through students completing a ballot but opening up the school once again, the latter part of this week when students are out of school, to offer alumni, even though they were against the name change, to vote on what the new name should be and any community members that were against or for the change, to come into the school and complete a ballot. We will take that information back and I will come to you at the January 7, 2014 Board meeting, as part of the regular agenda, to offer the new name of N.B. Forrest, if the Board votes to approve my recommendation.

Ms. Couch said before we take a vote, I'd like to thank Dr. Vitti and your staff for all of the long hours put into collecting the surveys, helping us host the Town Hall meeting as I know it has taken quite a bit of time to get this information for the Board and I want to thank you for that.

I want to thank my fellow Board members for your commitment to listening and making an educated decision that you feel is best for students. It is a very contentious and emotional issue but as previously said by many of you, we were elected to lead. I just applaud you for your commitment to the students of this school district. It's been brought up several times at the podium this evening, remember you were elected and I can promise you that when I ran for School Board, I always said I will always keep students first. I believe that is the same commitment from my fellow Board members, as well, and for that reason, I choose to support the name change of Nathan Bedford Forrest.

So, at this time, I'm going to ask my fellow Board members to register their vote.

Motions:

That the School Board of Duval County, Florida,
approve the request to rename Nathan B. Forrest
High School No. 241.

- PASS

Vote Results

Motion: Connie Hall

Second: Paula Wright

Rebecca Couch - Aye

Jason Fischer - Aye

Cheryl Grymes - Aye

Connie Hall - Aye

Ashley Juarez - Aye

Fred Lee - Aye

Paula Wright - Aye

Adjournment

[ADJOURNMENT](#)

Minutes:

The Special meeting adjourned at 7:02 p.m.

Isd

Superintendent

Chairman