



Acton-Boxborough Regional School District

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Tessa McKinley

Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee Chair

October 13, 2020

To My Fellow School Committee Members,

I'm writing to you to share and comment on the feedback we have received regarding the petition to remove the colonial as the mascot of the Acton-Boxborough Regional School District.

As you know, the Acton Boxborough Students for Equity and Justice (ABSEJ) first approached the committee on July 11, 2020 with the presentation of their petition to change the colonial mascot. I met with the group along with Peter Light, Dawn Bentley, and Larry Dorey on August 13, 2020. The group then presented formally to us as a committee at our September 17th meeting. In the time since, we have received a plethora of feedback from our current students and staff, alumni, and community members. There have been heated discussions on many platforms, some more respectful than others. A second petition was created and circulated. We have received over 350 emails (and are still receiving them as I type) with all sorts of opinions. About half of the communications we received were from current students/staff and alumni. The other half were from community members. Of the community members that wrote in, they were divided nearly evenly over whether or not to retire the mascot. Alumni were similarly divided. When it came to our current students and staff, however, the numbers couldn't be clearer. 74% of our current students and staff that took the time to write to us were in favor of retiring the mascot.

As of 4:00 pm 10/13/20	Keep the mascot	Retire the mascot
Alumni	25	23
Community members	89	87
Current students/staff	30	85
Responses w/no preference	14	
Total responses	353	

I was completely ambivalent about raising this issue when it was first brought to my attention in July. I knew that we had a mountain of work in front of us as we attempted to bring kids and teachers back to school. I knew that we had an uncertain financial future but I also knew that we had an incredibly

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passionate group of students who had done their homework and were ready to make their case. I must admit that I am incredibly glad that they were so persistent in their requests. I have spent the last month doing a lot of listening. I have read some compelling arguments representing the *intent* of the designation of the colonial as our mascot. I have also read some devastating emails detailing the *impact* of having the colonial as our mascot. As we begin our discussion, I want to remind you of the question that is before us because that question has become somewhat distorted in the rhetoric that has developed around each side of this debate. The student petition asks us to retire a mascot that causes discomfort for many in our community. They are not looking to erase all vestiges of colonial representation. The retirement of a mascot is NOT a statement that our colonial roots should be negated. Similarly, there are many in the community that feel that the colonial represents the values of freedom, hard work and the struggle against oppression. There is room in our community for us to acknowledge that the mascot that has represented us for decades may no longer be the best representation for our community going forward. This is not a reflection of missed opportunities to learn history. Rather, it is an incredible tribute to our teachers and students that they have uncovered a history that was long misrepresented.

As a committee we have committed ourselves to the values of diversity, equity and inclusion. While it seems that this request may only be symbolic in nature, it is clear from the correspondence we received that this is a major barrier for many students and staff to do the necessary anti-racist work that we have acknowledged is central to our growth as a school community. I hope that our conversation will be focused on the question at hand: Should the colonial mascot be retired? This is not the same question as should a minority opinion govern the majority or should we honor our heritage or should we change our social studies curriculum? All of these are valid questions but not what we are tasked with as a committee. I read this morning, this tidbit from historian Heather Cox Richardson and it is timely: "History, though, is different from commemoration. History is about what happened in the past while commemoration is about the present. We put up statues and celebrate holidays to honor figures from the past who embody some quality we admire. But as society changes, the qualities we care about shift." I look forward to listening to your thoughts and questions as we respectfully discuss this issue.

Thank you,
Tessa