

# “It’s Going to Start a Civil War”: A Midland School Discards Its Confederate Name

Shedding Lee High’s offensive legacy may leave less money and public support to address issues of educational equity.

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Wall: Iibusca/Getty

“It’s a shame they make those boys play under Lee,” young Denise Gray

heard her father muttering as he sat in his favorite living room chair, watching the Midland Robert E. Lee Rebels football team on TV, as it played Odessa's Permian Panthers, under the bright white Friday night lights of West Texas.

It was 1997, and she was in junior high school. Sprawled on the living room floor, she didn't know she'd someday marry one of the Rebels' then-stars, John Norman. Nor could she have imagined that, nearly three decades later, she'd ask her father-in-law, Jerry Norman, about sitting in the stadium during the team's games. How did it feel to him, as a Black man, when Midland Lee scored and the band struck up a rousing chorus of "Dixie" while Confederate flags were waved with wild delight by spectators around him? Jerry's eyes welled up at the memory. "No one ever asked me that before," he said.

As recently as June, Texas had 45 schools named for Confederate figures, easily beating out runner-up states Georgia (23) and Virginia (24) in that dubious distinction. But as the effects of the protests in the aftermath of George Floyd's death reverberated nationwide, some public officials were moved to action. A mere four months later, five fewer schools in Texas bear Confederate namesakes. Midland's Lee High School and its freshman campus are among those to shed traditions that have caused pain to generations of Black students and parents, like the Normans.

Though there were counterpetitions and counterprotests that sought to prevent the change, the Midland ISD board in July responded to a petition signed by 10,363 residents and voted, 6-1, to rename Lee. Then, earlier this month, it was officially rechristened Legacy High School (though the change won't take effect until fall 2021). Its school colors, maroon and white, will remain. The mascot will still be a Rebel too, only reimagined as an American Revolutionary War hero instead of a secessionist defender of slavery.

Some factions in Midland remain angry about the decision, vowing to vote out MISD board members in next week's election, threatening a lawsuit, and even starting a petition to recall trustees they deem to have defied their constituents. Many opponents also say they'll now refuse to support a much-

needed bond package to upgrade educational facilities and address overcrowding in the district's campuses. (A \$569 million dollar bond **failed by 26 votes**, out of 23,626 cast, in a debacle involving a misplaced voting box last January.) Not all the dissenters make their case purely in protest of what they consider "revisionist history." Some question the prudence of spending **millions of dollars** to rebrand a school (for facilities, fine arts, and athletics, according to the preliminary report) at a time when the city's economy has been gutted by slumping oil prices, **nearly half of the district's forty schools** are deemed as failing by the Texas Education Agency, and school buildings are so aged that at one elementary campus the **drinking water ran brown** and contained high levels of arsenic.

Indeed, one risk after the name change is that it might enable some in Midland to mistakenly think the city has crossed the finish line when it comes to racial justice and educational equity. The uncomfortable truth is that Midland's reckoning with its past and present is far from over, even after the new Legacy High School sign goes up.

In 1954, after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision instructed the nation to desegregate "with all deliberate speed," nothing much changed in Midland. In 1961, the district opened a new high school on the northwest side of town, just about as far away as one could get from the city's predominantly minority neighborhoods. Thanks to redlining and the economic segregation of neighborhoods, the new school was almost certain to be entirely white. Should the district's intentions be unclear, the school board named the campus Robert E. Lee High School and chose a mascot that perfectly captured the community's prevailing "here's-where-you-can-shove-it" attitude toward outside authority: the Rebels.

Eventually the forces of integration prevailed, and Black students joined white students under the Lee banner. The Normans recall the stories of Black families over the years who lived in Lee's attendance zone but who would quietly ask for a transfer for their children. As a single father raising three boys, Jerry Norman believed athletics would be the ticket his sons could ride to college scholarships and a good life, and the Lee football

program offered their best chance. Plus, as one of the Permian Basin's oil-field service industry's first Black business owners, he was told some of his pumping contracts with white business owners depended on him leaving his boys to play for Lee. Making a fuss about the name of the high school was a luxury he says their family could ill afford.

Over the years, the school slowly dismantled some of its troublesome traditions. The Confederate flag was no longer allowed on the football field by 1991, though it continued to be waved by fans in the stands after touchdowns. And while the marching band stopped playing "Dixie" in 2017, the Dixie Dolls remained the school's dance troop up until the renaming decision. An earlier 2017 campaign to change the school name had failed, with opponents suggesting it was the work of agitators from outside Midland. After that, the issue quieted down for a few years, until the events of 2020 upended so much for so many.

Roderick Strambler, an energy company landman and member of the LHS class of 1993, is Black, but unlike the Normans, he didn't want Lee's name to change. While he understands the original racist intentions behind the school's name, he believes reducing the school's history to its Confederacy-laced heritage gives it more power than it deserves. "By the time I was in high school from 1990 to 1993, there was nothing but love in that building," Strambler said. "Those teachers, they took me in and taught me. My coaches took me in and taught me. ... God turned that evil thing into a positive thing because he works miracles like that."

Strambler, along with John Norman, was among those selected to serve on a committee to recommend a new name for the school. He points to an exchange during one of the committee's early meetings as evidence of how far Midland remains from confronting issues that would make a far more substantial difference than the discarding of the Lee name. Midland's high school students were not attending in-person classes, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, so one committee member suggested sending a poll to the students, via email, asking for their thoughts. The idea was quickly shot down

over concerns that many students lacked reliable computer access and would be left out.

“Don’t you think, with the money you’re trying to change the name with, you need to make sure our kids have what they need first, and then let’s get to the name change?” Strambler remembers incredulously asking. “Our priorities are way backwards. This is not about the kids. If this were about the kids, every kid would have a laptop.” Though the district has worked hard to ensure that Wi-Fi hotspots and laptops are available to students, shortages remain. Strambler’s question is valid. If the students didn’t have computer access to fill out a poll, how were they supposedly participating in virtual *Moby-Dick* discussion groups or learning about differential equations?

Looking at the student population of my own daughter’s school also points to the more serious work that remains for Midland. She’s a fourth-grader at the district’s top-rated public elementary school, Carver Center, which enrolls students identified as gifted and talented. It’s housed in the building that, pre-integration, was the district’s Black high school. Yet its student body is **54.8 percent white and 11.2 percent socioeconomically disadvantaged** in a district that overall is just 24.7 percent white and is 47.1 percent socioeconomically disadvantaged. Midland’s historically Black school now serves mostly middle-class white kids. Is that the district’s fault? Is the very existence of a selective “gifted and talented” school a problem? Some say yes and yes, but Carver Center is beloved by a new generation of families, including my own. It’s a messy and complicated situation, and solving the imbalance is far more difficult than changing a school name.

Bring challenges like these up to many Midlanders, and there’s uncomfortable silence at best, finger-pointing at worst. Midland’s a town where those who can afford to take shelter from the beleaguered public education system in private schools often do, further robbing the school system of engaged families. It could be considered a community pastime to berate the school district for its faults. (MISD just **fired its superintendent** for failing to improve school performance.)

In a town where boom times make it easy to earn six figures in the oil patch without a high school diploma, we need to reckon with the implications of the resulting low communal value we often place on education. We need to have difficult conversations about contributing factors such as parental engagement. We need to commit to personal and collective investments in improving schools for our entire community, not just for our own children. Those who advocated for changing the name of Lee High School think that Midland just took an important step toward doing that hard work. But some of those against the name change fear it was a step in the wrong direction.

“It’s going to start a civil war right here in Midland,” Strambler said. “It won’t be guns and shooting like the Civil War of Robert E. Lee. It’s going to be the civil war of subtle punches. And you know who is going to pay? The kids. The very ones they say they’re doing all this for.”

Curled up in the heart of the high school’s new name, Legacy, is a question: What will our own legacy be? In the aftermath of our school board’s decision to rename Lee, we appear to have become more fractured and factious than ever. Will we draw battle lines over this decision and refuse to collaborate? Will we refuse to increase funding for our schools because we’re angry things didn’t turn out our way? Will we pat ourselves on the back for being progressive enough to change an offensive name, yet remain content to gloss over the deeper problems, the achievement gaps widening in our community in the midst of this pandemic?

I hope not. Instead, I hope we come together to embody another legacy we’ve inherited in this part of the country—a wildcatter spirit that looks out over barren lands and knows there’s something valuable waiting to be unearthed.

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