

Removal of Riverside Secondary School Mascot and Team Name

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The GECSB is committed to dismantling anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism and to creating safe, caring, and inclusive learning environments for all students. In keeping with this commitment, the GECSB is ethically and legally compelled to immediately and completely remove the team name, “Rebels”, from Riverside Secondary School (“RSS”) and to immediately discontinue the use of its mascot “Captain Rebel”.

The GECSB would like to express appreciation and gratitude to those who brought this crucial human rights issue to our attention. The act of speaking up and taking action in response to injustice exemplifies what it means to be a human rights leader.

The Rebel name and related symbols are connected with anti-Black hate. Confederate soldiers, who fought to retain the enslavement of Black peoples in the United States, were called “Rebels” or “Johnny Rebel”. Johnny Rebel is also the name of a white supremacist country singer whose songs feature anti-Black hate and racial slurs. In addition to being referred to as “Rebels”, we understand that the Confederate army appropriated the name of the Comanche Nation in relation to the Rebel battle cry, based on harmful, anti-Indigenous stereotypes. The battle cry is referred to in the RSS school spirit song.

The connection between pro-enslavement, anti-Black hate and the Rebel name is conveyed in RSS yearbooks and a newspaper article that have been discovered from the 60s, 80s and 90s. These records display the Confederate flag as RSS’ “school spirit” flag, and a mascot dressed in KKK garb carrying the Confederate flag. RSS’ mascot was named “Johnny Rebel”, although the name was changed to “Captain Rebel” in the Spring of 2021. The GECSB acknowledges and sincerely apologizes for the damaging messages and harms caused by all of these names and representations, including the 2021 decision to change only the mascot’s first name. The board will conduct a thorough human rights investigation into what took place in 2021.

The GECSB is committed to meeting its obligations under the *Human Rights Code* to ensure our learning environments are caring, inclusive, safe, welcoming, positive and supportive of all students. This school year, the board will initiate human rights training for school administrators which will include training on responding appropriately to human rights issues in schools. The GECSB recognizes the imperative of addressing anti-Black racism in schools, and a process to develop a strategy to dismantle anti-Black racism is underway. This Spring, the board plans to rollout Indigenous Cultural Competency training to an initial cohort of principals and vice-principals. We know much more work is needed.

School dialogues on this issue have an impact on our students and should appropriately center care and concern for the inclusion and well-being of our Black and Indigenous students. Our conversations about this issue need to be conscious and contextual, and situated within the

recognition that these students already experience profound harms within the school system both historically and in the present.

In a [communication to municipalities on the harmful impact of racist-themed sports logos](#), the Ontario Human Rights Commission stated, “As service providers, municipalities have obligations under the Code to provide a service environment free of discrimination. Human rights law has found that images and words that degrade people because of their ancestry, race, colour and ethnic origin, among other grounds, violate the Code.”

This statement is entirely applicable to boards of education and schools. The Commission further states, “Derogatory images and words can have a significant impact on the ability of affected individuals and groups to participate and benefit equally in services such as participating as a member of a sports team or attending games as a spectator. There can also be broader social and psychological impacts on such individuals and groups, including how they are viewed and treated in their community.”

In accordance with the Ministry of Education’s [2017 Education Equity Action Plan](#) “we must continue to strive toward positive, equitable learning and working environments, identifying and eliminating sources of systemic discrimination.”

In its [Professional Advisory on Anti-Black Racism](#) the Ontario College of Teachers provides the following direction to its members: “A welcoming learning environment for Black students requires an understanding of the importance of dismantling oppressive, colonial attitudes and practices.” It further states that “OCTs and those with power and influence must also demonstrate empathy, respect and understanding of the lived experience of students, particularly those who identify as Black.”

In the last year, some members of the RSS community have voiced their concerns about the school spirit name and mascot. Recently, two schools in Ontario have rebranded, removing Rebel spirit names and accompanying iconography. There have also been numerous, similar actions taken in communities in the U.S., some in southern states.

We need to understand the racist symbolism and images within the context of the particular history of this area. Many Black community members are descendants of Black people who arrived here fleeing slavery, violence, and murders that are intimately connected with this hateful symbolism and imagery. Communities throughout the region had racially segregated schools for more than 100 years, with the last one closing in 1965. Indigenous peoples across Canada are still resisting colonialization and grieving and recovering from the terrible harms and deaths that occurred at residential schools.

It is clear that the use of the name, Rebels, and related imagery, is associated with white supremacy, hate, terror, unspeakable harms, and loss of life. They will be removed without further delay.

School administration and board staff are developing a strategy to provide education and support for RSS students and staff. They are also developing a thoughtful process for the selection of a new and equitable name and brand for the school, in cooperation with the school community.

Following the original release of this backgrounder on [date], RSS alumni provided historical information showing the feather on the RSS logo was intended to be a quill. We apologize for any confusion and we are thankful for the additional information and the thoughtful guidance of the Board's Indigenous Education Advisory Committee.