

884 Greenberry Ln.  
San Rafael, CA 94903

5 January 2019

Dear Dr. Yamashiro and members of the Dixie School Board:

Academic research on racial messaging and its impact in educational settings offers two key insights into the dispute over whether to rename the Dixie School District.

- 1) given the known history behind the name of the Dixie School District, experts in educational equity would consider it to be a form of racial microaggression;
- 2) such microaggressions have a *demonstrated negative impact* on the educational success rates and the self-esteem of students of color.

Given those two research-supported, evidence-backed findings, it seems reckless and destructive not to make the modest effort required to change the District's name. To put it in more common-sense terms, **the name Dixie sends a subtle and implicit message of racial exclusion, of a kind that's been shown to do harm to students of color.**

A little further background:

First, leading researchers in the field of educational equity consider environmental factors such as the presence of racist mascots and monuments to Confederate history—the second of which, the name of our school district clearly is—to be a form of racial microaggression. This is a widely used and accepted term that emerged in the 1970s within the field of social psychology. It recognizes the presence in many social interactions and settings of (usually) unintentional, subtle messages and assumptions that devalue or discount people of color, their viewpoints, and their historical experiences. The effects of microaggressions are cumulative. Dr. Derald Wing Sue of Teachers College, Columbia University, is one of the most prominent and widely cited researchers studying the psychological impact of such “near-invisible” messages of racial exclusion. Summarizing eight years of his team's research, for *Psychology Today*, he writes, “these racial microaggressions may on the surface appear like a compliment or seem quite innocent and harmless, but nevertheless, they contain what we call demeaning meta-communications or hidden messages.” Sue continues, “some research and testimony from people of color indicate they are better able to handle overt, conscious and deliberate acts of racism than the unconscious, subtle and less obvious forms.”<sup>1</sup>

Sue and other researchers explicitly include the presence of Confederate flags, Confederate monuments, and public naming that honors the Confederacy and its leaders among the prevalent forms of environmental microaggressions or microinvalidations whose impact they study.

That such microaggressions have a measurable negative impact on the educational experience and educational outcomes of students is now documented by a growing body of research. Because I am more familiar with the research on higher education, that is what I'll reference here; but similar studies with similar findings have been undertaken in K-12 contexts.

To start with the connection between an environment of racial microaggression and student success, let me paraphrase the key conclusions from the 2015 report, “Racial Microaggressions at University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign,” by Stacy Anne Harwood, Shinwoo Choi, Moises Orozco, Margaret Browne Hunt, and Ruby Mendenhall: In higher education, there is a *direct correlation* between minority students’ perception of negative racial campus climates and lower rates of academic persistence and retention. Conversely, a positive racial environment is associated with higher grades and graduation rates for students of color. Among the impacts of racism experienced by people of color are harmful psychological and physiological effects such as fear, resentment, anxiety, helplessness, isolation, stress, and exhaustion. Chronic exposure to these forms of discrimination causes racial battle fatigue and undermines psychological and physiological well-being. Students have reported physical symptoms such as headaches, high blood pressure, and fatigue. Again, these are the findings of a study focused not on overt discrimination but on microaggressions and their cumulative impact.

Multiple scholarly studies also document the negative impact of racial microaggressions on the *self-esteem* of college students of color.<sup>2</sup> The authors of one study on the impact of microaggressions on African American college students summarize the resulting “sense of discouragement, frustration, and exhaustion”.<sup>3</sup>

A list of selected further studies follows at the end of this document. In summary, regardless of how harmless members of our community may consider the name Dixie to be, there is ample evidence from educational research that *real and lasting harm* is done to the educational outcomes and self-esteem of students of color who must learn in an environment where even “subtle” or “unintentional” messages are present honoring a history that excluded and devalued those like them. I hope we will choose not to take the chance of perpetuating such negative impacts.

Sincerely,



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*(Please note that I include my credentials for identification/authentication purposes only; I am writing as a private individual, scholar, and resident of the Dixie School District, and I am in no way speaking here for Dominican University of California.)*

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Selected further studies:

Booker, K. (2007). Perceptions of classroom belongingness among African American college students. *College Student Journal*, 41(1), 178-186. Brown, T. (2000). Gender differences in African American college students’ satisfaction with college. *Journal of College Student Development*, 41(5), 479- 487.

- Chang, M. J. (1999). Does racial diversity matter?: The educational impact of a racially diverse undergraduate population. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40, 377–395.
- Clark, R., Anderson, N. B., Clark, V. R., & Williams, D. R. (1999). Racism as a stressor for African Americans: A biopsychosocial model. *American Psychologist*, 54(10), 805-816.
- Goodenow, C. (1993). The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in the Schools*, 30(1), 79-90.
- Hinderlie, H., & Kenny, M. (2002). Attachment, social support, and college adjustment among Black students at predominantly White universities. *Journal of College Student Development*, 43(3), 327-340.
- Ong, A.D., Burrow, A. L., Ja, N. M., Fuller-Rowell, T. E., Sue, D. W. (2013) Racial Microaggressions and Daily Well-Being Among Asian Americans. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 60.
- Reid, L. D., & Radhakrishnan, P. (2003). Race matters: The relations between race and general campus climate. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 9, 263–275.
- Smith, W. A., Hung, M., & Franklin, J. D. (2011). Racial battle fatigue and the miseducation of Black men: Racial microaggressions, societal problems, and environmental stress. *Journal of Negro Education*, 80(1), 63-82.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2008). Sentido de pertencia: A hierarchal analysis predicting sense of belonging among college students. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 7(4), 301-320.
- Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Worthington, R. L., Navarro, R. L., Loewy, M. & Hart, J. (2008). Color-blind racial attitudes, social dominance orientation, racial-ethnic group membership and College students' perceptions of campus climate. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 1(1), 8-19

Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201010/racial-microaggressions-in-everyday-life>

<sup>2</sup> See, among others, Nadal, K. L. (2011). The Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS): Construction, reliability, and validity. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 58, 470-480; and Nadal, K., Wong, Y., Griffin, K., Davidoff, K. & Striken, J. (2014). The Adverse Impact of Racial Microaggressions on College Students' Self-Esteem. *Journal of College Student Development*. 55. 461-474.

<sup>3</sup> Solorzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students. *Journal of Negro Education*. 69. 60-73.