

Good evening and thank you for providing a few minutes for me to review our process and some insights into the Rebel mascot investigation at South Albany High School. The steps in the process and data summaries are outlined in the board packet.

In August, significant violence shook our nation and caused South Albany and district leadership to discuss the mascot and we began to ask the hard questions. Additional situations continue to keep student safety in the front of our minds.

In my career, I've faced many situations where there was an easy answer but more often than not, the easy answer is not necessarily the right answer. It would have been much easier for the school and the district to "let this pass." We decided to search for the right answer rather than accept the more comfortable or easier response, so we began a year long process of investigating our Rebel mascot.

I have been a Rebel for almost all of my 37 years in education. I have been a passionate Rebel Teacher, Rebel Coach, and Rebel Administrator. My children graduated as Rebels – their spouses graduated as Rebels. My grandchildren are constantly wearing Rebel gear. I knew that I was very close to this topic and that it would be very hard for me to be truly objective. For this reason, I asked for help from the superintendent in making the final decision. In addition, we asked for help from outside sources to help us with the process.

As a long time Rebel, I've found myself challenged many times this year as we have expended an incredible amount of energy to dig deep into this topic. To be totally transparent, I had hoped for an easy decision with the intent to investigate and to somehow be able to educate people about our school and how our mascot has changed over time and doesn't define us as a school. I have been teacher, coach or administrator to over 40,000 Rebel alumni. I also knew this was a topic that is deeply personal for many and that has deep roots in our community.

As I investigated the history and spoke with people who were part of creating South Albany High School almost 50 years ago, I discovered the students of the new school did not select the name South Albany, nor did they select Rebels as their first choices. I discovered what at least appears to have been a very purposeful thought process to create and to a certain extent – maintain a division between the two schools from the start. I discovered that some of the very things that we hold dear to our hearts as Rebels were created through less than perfect conditions. I discovered a very very deep connection to the Rebel mascot – not because of what it stands for to people on the outside of our community, but because of what it stands for within the tight knit South Albany community. It has been given great value because it allows people to keep a little bit of a "chip on the shoulder" or "underdog" status that many have indicated motivates them personally.

As the year progressed, I found my personal beliefs challenged in many ways. I was incredibly proud of our students and the respectful and thoughtful process they went through with 80 combined students from South and Parkrose. All kids found the conversations to be incredibly valuable as our students began to understand how they were perceived because of our mascot.

One scene that I have not been able to forget was during a Socratic seminar when one of our awesome kids spoke passionately about their belief in our mascot and what it really means to people at our school. A little girl of color responded respectfully and kindly and said, "While I understand what you're saying, because of my life experiences, I just don't have the ability to separate the rebel mascot from the negative history that I associate with the name – in spite of getting to know you all as great people."

As we heard from the community, there are equally passionate voices on both sides of the discussion. When the feedback is broken down into themes, it sets tradition and the strong belief in what South Albany is as a school against how others perceive our school as racist or unwelcoming because of the mascot.

We simply have incredible kids at South Albany. We asked 1,350 kids to dig into five written articles and to think deeply and to question each other at a very high level. The feedback from our kids included the importance of tradition, how we rally around being different and that they know deeply that our school isn't racist. At the same time, our kids understand that others perception – created by the mascot – cause them to think about racism, cause them to be offended, or cause them to question their safety in our school. For our kids and our school, the idea that someone wouldn't feel welcomed or safe is shocking and hard to comprehend because our kids see South Albany as welcoming and safe. It creates a significant conflict of emotions and thoughts for our kids and staff.

One of the articles we all read that was written by SAHS alumni and it had one statement that really caused many of us to pause. Melanie Springer Mock, referencing the current mascot discussion wrong, "...it is fueling division within South's community and among its alums: a divisiveness that undermines a mascot's purpose, which is to unify people behind a common goal or idea." Again, I had to pause and consider my own position – not just because of one person's words but because I had to ask myself if the very symbol we rally around causes conflict within our own South Albany community? I've discovered that there is no easy answer.

As we become more culturally diverse as a community and we all individually become more culturally aware – even though we have a deep history and passionate commitment for the Rebel mascot – Can we ignore that we have heard from people both inside and outside of our school and within and outside of the Albany community that the mascot can create a negative impression of what is truly a great school?" Again, there is no easy answer.

As the building principal, I review all transfer requests each year and I pay close attention to the reason why families would choose not to attend what I believe is one of the best high schools in the state. Each year, there is almost always a parent or two that indicates that their child will not attend a school with a racist symbol representing the school. As I've researched this topic all year, those comments come back to me and I begin to wonder about my own commitment to being a Rebel when it creates a controversy for families in our community or who might move to our community.

Our kids said many times in their 40+ pages of input that the mascot doesn't define the school. Regardless of what people may perceive, South Albany isn't a racist school – that SAHS is welcoming and safe for everyone. While it's tempting to stop there and enjoy that the kids in our school feel this way – I have to continue to ask myself, "What about the kids/families that don't feel safe or chose not to attend a great school because of our mascot?"

My comments this evening started with the idea that there are often easy answers to our questions. The hard part is trying to determine if the easy answer is the right answer. In this case, after begin part of hundreds of conversations and hearing input from thousands of people, I hope that we can make the hard decision and allow our school to move away from the divisiveness of the current mascot and to create a whole new positive chapter in the history of South Albany. I think we all understand that there is no decision that will be popular with everyone.

We have the opportunity to make the hard decision and to get past this to begin to bring together people from inside and outside the South Albany community. Many of our kids and staff have state that it's time to move beyond this decades long debate about a mascot when there are ma y more important objectives to spend our time and resources on.

As a long time Rebel and lifetime supporter of South Albany High School – I appreciate the challenging opportunity that this has been to me personally and that this has been for others in our community. I do ask that a decision be made tonight so that our school van put the debate behind us and move forward as we continue to serve kids and build dreams for the future.

Respectfully,

Brent Belveal