

## Death Threats, Walk Outs & High Anxiety – How Sponsored School Name Change Campaigns are Hurting American High School Communities and their Students.

High Schools around the nation have suddenly become ideological and political battlegrounds where 100s of “guilty” institutions of education have been deemed to have “offensive” names by well-coordinated activists who are demanding changes to Native American or Confederate themed schools no matter how long the tradition, how strong the regional relevance or how historically appropriate the name is.

And while the campaign tactics vary some outcomes are consistent – no matter who wins or loses it’s always the community and student body who suffer the most as divisions increase, grades drop and anxiety takes over. It is with these outcomes in mind that this paper will consider the macro phenomena of name change while investigating one school caught in the middle of a hyperbolic name change campaign led by an national activist organization to understand how this type of PR campaign costs the students in the long run where important High School years are often ruined academically at a minimum.

### High School Name Change Campaigns – The Work of National Activist Groups

Change agents are routinely described as ‘out-of-towners’ by impacted communities. Some are backed by 501c3s or [major corporations](#) hoping to turn a quick profit on new uniforms - often gain access by [coordinating](#) with willing [students](#) in flooding once-sanguine communities, school boards or booster meetings with divisive rhetoric while simultaneously gaining sympathetic media coverage. Those who stand up to the “changers” have often faced [legal ultimatums](#), [physical threats](#), or [vandalism](#).



name changes are happening against the will of a student while highlights this trend where a \$1.2 million dollar lawsuit was the result of a Confederate named school where “*The board disregarded the wishes and alumni who wanted to keep the school names the same.*” Lawsuits aside, communities are never the same after a forced or unpopular name change. Those who fought against the changes feel betrayed by seemingly feckless or downright corrupt school boards. While angry adults have routinely swept [offending officials](#) or school board members [out of office](#) students are left to suffer direct personal impacts.

For instance, distraught students exhibited amazingly similar reactions in [Oklahoma](#), [Massachusetts](#) and [New York](#) when losing their school identity in bolting from their classes by the 100s. These unexpected reactions forced police and parental involvement, traffic snarls, missed tests and detentions. Student punishments, in turn, hastened the resentment of the replacement name while simultaneously developing *negative associations* with those teachers or school board members seen as complicit.

In Vermont a student who had been subject to a school change campaign became so upset he sent a string of [death threats](#) to the 11 students seen as the instigators of the campaign and their staff accomplices. And in California, five students undergoing a name change campaign have [ideated suicide](#) while others at the same school were suspended for a hazing incident.

## **The Impacts of a Negative-Based “Change” Narrative Thrust on Communities, Schools & Students**

Findings in the [Journal of Contemporary Educational Psychology](#) explain that a teenager’s positive identity formation is closely tied to their High School experience. Identity development, it’s argued, can strongly correlate to personal affirmation. As school’s symbol is traditionally meant to convey the power of sports teams, it also helps form aspects of a student’s identity. Thus, a teenager’s affiliations with a school’s long-term traditions, the wearing of shared “power” images or via participation in bonding behavior - such as singing theme songs, firing of a canon or participating in a pep-rally - help bond students to their school’s image, theme or name.

Participation in school traditions also heightens one’s sense of [belonging](#) to both their peer group and community as most residents share - or shared as students themselves - the same rituals and identity. Thus [Social Scientists](#) suggest that students who participate in these rituals are perpetuating an important act called “community building” such that the loss of a school name impacts both the students and community identity negatively.

“Change” advocates attempt to sever this positive relationship by conjuring up a school’s namesake as a historic villain or part of a *misdeed* as the *cause célèbre* in projecting *Guilt by Association* in what social scientists call the fallacy of [Presentism](#). These campaigns attack a teen’s identity via embarrassment or guilt. The authors of *Helping Your Depressed Teenager* write that “Identity is the sense of one’s special place in the world” and that “Teenagers are constantly trying to discover who they are, who they will become and where they belong.” They suggest during their identity formation “teenagers are very sensitive to criticisms and rejections” and need acceptance and understanding in order to help them cope. Experts warn that a student’s lack of coping skills in being able to intellectually defend themselves from such attacks can retard formation of positive identity thus making them highly vulnerable to behavioral or emotional outbursts.

These “[loss events](#)” can also foster feelings equal to the loss of a close friend or family member and often lead to [group](#) isolation which cascades into further emotional distress. To this end, the National Institute of Mental Health [suggests](#) traumatized teens may feel disruptive Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms for months. These fall into categories including Avoidance, Arousal or Cognition:

**Avoidance:** “Staying away from places, events, or objects that are reminders of the traumatic experience or avoiding thoughts or feelings related to the traumatic event.” Triggering of this

*symptom can happen when she is reminded of that person such that they would avoid related places or issues.*

**Arousal** (or Reactivity): 1) Easily startled; 2) Feeling Tense; 3) Difficulty Sleeping or 4) Having Angry Outbursts. These symptoms are usually consistent and "...may make it hard to do daily tasks, such as sleeping, eating, or concentrating."

**Cognition** (or Mood): 1) Trouble remembering key features of the traumatic event; 2) Negative thoughts about oneself or the world; 3) Distorted feelings like guilt or blame and 4) Loss of interest in enjoyable activities... may feel alienated or detached from close ones.

These symptoms are often accompanied by depression, substance abuse, or other [anxiety disorders](#) which include restlessness or on edge; easily fatigued; difficulty concentrating or irritability.

### **Past Positive Mindset vs. Past Negative Mindsets – A Coping Mechanism**

Students exposed to a "change" campaign may be separated into two groups; those who ignore, reject or rationalize the historic guilt narrative and those who absorb, internalize or identify with it. Stanford Psychologist Phil Zimbardo's [The Time Paradox](#), describes two groups; 1) those students who have a "**past positive mindset**" and 2) those holding a "**past negative mindset**".

Zimbardo describes "past negative mindsets" as those who evaluate situations through the *perception of a past trauma*. These people are likely to feel slighted and, ultimately, will seek to exact some sort of *retribution* to 'even the cultural score' by maintaining a "*vendetta mentality*."

Zimbardo calls this so polarizing as to typically *undercut attempts at peaceful reconciliations* based on a belief that new generations are *obligated to avenge* slights or crimes against *prior* generations. Alternatively, students with "past positive mindsets" are those who *would explore the shared positive experiences or views of the past* and *seek to maintain* the school's pre-attack cultural and political status quo. Specially, they would seek to *conserve or re-create in the present with what was good or positive in the past*.

Zimbardo finds those who have developed a **past negative mindset** are likely to be: *More Aggressive and Anxious; Less Conscientious or Considerate; more depressed; less stable, less friendly, less happy, have lower self esteem and "higher tempers"* than their past **positive mindset peers**.

## Case Study J.E.B. Stuart H.S., Falls Church, Va. (Entire Analysis may be [viewed here](#))

J. E. B. Stuart High School in Falls Church, Va., was named in 1959 for a Confederate cavalry commander who was often heralded as a model of diversity and mutual understanding as described in this 2001 National Geographic [story](#): "So why would anyone want to immigrate to the U.S.?" I ask, wondering if the students can reconcile this country's ideals with its shortcomings. Hands go up. "**It's the tolerance,**" adds one voice. And then another: "The best way for us to learn tolerance is just seeing people of other cultures every day here." Heads nod in agreement."

And while the school also enjoyed a Presidential visit where it again was declared a model of unity, the tolerance narrative was shattered by a change campaign launched when five student activists partnered with the NAACP in the fall of 2015. Stuart Senior Victoria Haver [describes](#) the once-sanguine Stuart school environment in this May 2017 newscast: "**People are very polarized... It's either, 'you're a racist and a bigot because you don't want the name changed,' or 'you hate America and you hate our history, because you do want it changed.'**"

Another news headline declared, "**Tensions are rising in the controversy over changing the name ... Three community leaders advocating to keep the name have filed police reports after they were called white supremacists on the anonymous web forum Fairfax Underground. Now, they say they won't attend the meeting out of [fear for their safety.](#)**"

### The Stuart Students Physical, Mental Health & Academic Health before and after the Campaign

While the students at Stuart were feeling the stress and anxiety, the identity crisis was made worse when the official Fairfax County School Board's student survey [demonstrated that 89%](#) of the student body had no interest in name change yet the hyperbolic change campaign was *not only allowed* to continue by key members of the school board but ramped up the heated rhetoric via sanctioned and sponsored student "outreach" campaigns. [Sensational FOIA's documents](#) demonstrate how closely the change campaign was being essentially run clandestinely by the NAACP. Given the aggressiveness of rhetoric and extent of freedom the NAACP had in reaching into the student body we would expect to see clear impact in how the Stuart students reacted in maintaining their group identity.

### Measuring J.E.B. Stuart H.S.'s Group Identity 2014 vs. 2016

Group identity [may be described](#) as those social comparisons, norms and communication that forge common bonds and self identification; it helps define how [people feel about themselves](#) to include increasing one's pride, confidence and one's sense of well being. [Research suggests](#) that "The school yearbook is a sign of belonging--a documentation of social roles and allegiances." Thus, the yearbook words, symbols and images may be seen as a model to establish the strength of a school's group identity.

The J.E.B. Stuart yearbook, called the Saber, has routinely focused on celebrating J.E.B. Stuart in describing his family story, non-war exploits and strategic military accomplishments even within the past few years. Thus, we would expect to see stronger group identity when and where there are increased or overt positive tribute paid to the school's namesake.



Changes in images, graphics and *word* differences between the 2014 (left – the last full year before name change pressure started) and 2016 "Saber" should produce a reasonable measure of any group identity.

Tabulating each book's covers (front/back) suggest that in 2014 Stuart H.S. had very strong indicators of group identity where not one *individual's face* is seen. Instead the images, graphics and words all suggest the *primacy* of group identity elements where "JEB Stuart", or "Raiders" (the school's mascot) graphics and images, or of the school itself, make up the *primary* messaging value. The tally showcases 28 *primary* & 11 "incidental" where "incidental" may be seen as background but not the key image) *pride* images (N=39) are shown on the cover while 26 "Raider" images/graphics appear internally.

By 2016 - a full year into the name attack - there are *no longer any primary pride* images while three "incidental" identity images are shown (N=3). Internally, no "Raider" images/graphics were cited. Notably, the trend away from the "High" group identity shifted to "Low" in swapping out group-centric images to those which featured nearly exclusive non-affiliated individual or group shots where student's faces are clearly shown.

Moreover, the 2016 images do no aggregate around or clearly celebrate JEB Stuart, the Raiders or the school as was quite clear in 2014. Social scientists predict as group identities are lost, prior members will attempt to establish their independent or individual identities to separate themselves from their prior group affiliation – this trend away from strong group identity is evident.

### **Positive Group Identity at Nearby Washington & R. E. Lee High School**

Four miles away from J.E.B. Stuart is another confederate-themed high school called Washington & Lee (W&L). While J.E.B. has almost no public or internal school space interface with his image or characteristics just the opposite is true at W&L. Not only is Robert E. Lee's portrait common in the hallways and school offices, but his "General Characteristics" are updated within the hallways in several locations routinely while outdoors the Arlington public is

regaled with a large mural of Lee comingling with the signatures of hundreds of graduated students.



On a related “Identity” note, only one of the many J.E.B. Stuart library biographies was checked out (one time) in five years while Fairfax County’s R. E. Lee High School - alternatively - saw a healthy 68 Lee biography checkouts over the same period. This lack of literary interest correlates to the significant lack of “J.E.B. knowledge” demonstrated in student [survey results](#). The findings together demonstrate that the student body knew nearly nothing about the Stuart’s history or characteristics going into the 2015 name attack thus rendering most students intellectually defenseless against the NAACP’s divisive hyperbole.

While the Stuart “knowledge deficit” may be explained in part by a school board member mysteriously pulling the school’s [“What’s in a Name”](#) video at the height of the campaign, clearly the overall student body was never [“inoculated”](#) in giving a student the ability to resist the anti-J.E.B. narrative.

[Findings](#) suggest that a student’s early exposure to two-sided fact-based message (i.e. “General J.E.B. Stuart never owned slaves but as a Union Officer he had had inherited two for a short period and freed them in Kansas.”) increases a receiver’s resistance to subsequent attitude changes when ultimately exposed to a one sided message such as “J.E.B. Stuart hated black people”. Yet, based perhaps only on tradition alone, the Stuart students not only routinely rejected the name-change campaign, but any interest in it decidedly waned over time as noted in this official [school board report](#).

### **Loss of Group Identity Predicts Shifts in Behaviors, Physical Health and Academics**

As noted above, social scientists have long supported the notion that certain incendiary communications act like a “virus” by “*infecting*” the attitudes or opinions of uninformed audiences where we can assume the Stuart student body was fittingly uniformed based on surveys and library assessments. Thus the Stuart “change” messages may be dubbed as a “virus” where a student’s attitude could shift from one of neutral mindset to one that forms a **“past negative mindset”** such as...“Civil War southerners were white supremacists.”

Remember Zimbardo predicted that “past negative mindset” students would likely be *More Aggressive and Anxious; more depressed; less stable, less friendly, have lower self esteem, less energy and higher tempers* than their past **positive mindset peers**. Many of these same symptoms may also be seen as part of the NIMS PTSD or Anxiety [disorders](#) which include substance abuse and behavior issues.

### Stuart Behavior & Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drug Offenses Before & After Campaign

Disorderly Or Disruptive Behavior Offenses	38	52
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Using these theories and disorders as context, we can look at Stuart’s before and after results of on the measures of Behavior and Substance Abuse as correlated to J.E.B.’s sudden loss of group identity as seen in the yearbook examples and vulnerability to “virus” messaging as seen in the survey/library works. In considering the 2014-15 (before campaign) and 2015-16 (after campaign) results we can see that Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Offenses jumped 177% year over year while Stuart student’s Disorderly/Disruptive Behavior rose 37%. (Source: <http://schoolprofiles.fcps.edu>)

### Stuart Physical Health Before and After Campaign

Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
2,883	2,075	2,883	2,075	2,883	2,075
71.5	71.5	71.5	71.5	71.5	71.5
71.5	71.5	71.5	71.5	71.5	71.5

The Institute of Mental Health [suggests](#) traumatized teens may suffer PTSD/Anxiety symptoms for months. The **Arousal** or **Reactivity** measure provides that students under attack will feel increased tenseness, fatigue or have difficulty sleeping. As a proxy for the Physical Health – where lack of sleep [impacts athletic performance](#) - Cardio Scores may be measured from first year students entering Stuart in 2014/15 against the first year students who entered in 2015/16 during a full “virus”/name change campaign. As a comparative baseline, Fairfax County Cardio averages over the same period are offered.

Data demonstrates that students suffered a significant downward trend in cardio scores among those students entering the community during the “virus” attack as compared to those from the year before the attack. While the Boy’s group drops off represent a combined **-6 and -7.9** points year over year same school vs. county average, the J.E.B. girls scores drop a significant **-16** and **-14.7** points vs. pre attack averages vs. previous County and Stuart scores. It is important to note that studies in [conformity find](#) that young females are highly vulnerable to the powers of peer pressure and conformity especially where the topic is complex. In cases like the Stuart campaign, research suggests that young females will more likely look to others to model solutions or expected behaviors as opposed to taking an individually thought out path of action.

### Stuart Academics Before and After Campaign – Avoidance, Arousal & Cognition



The NIMH [suggests](#) that symptoms of PTSD/Anxiety may enhance a student’s **Avoidance** of places or events that are reminders of a traumatic experience or in avoiding thoughts or feelings related to a traumatic event. These measures suggest that some Stuart students would avoid a hyperbolic lessons or topics of the change campaign such as Virginia History or Social Science.

Evidence details that certain Stuart teachers went beyond approved lesson plans and overemphasized the NAACP-campaign topics.

A [newspaper report](#) details what could be considered a student **Arousal** response to a teacher's "modified" Virginia history lesson. It's called modified as no evidence exists to tie in the naming of the school as a protest to the federal integration laws in either the assigned school history book, in the formal lesson plans made available via FOIA or among experts on the topic:

*"[S]enior Anna Rowan first learned the details of where her school's name came from when she took a history of the Americas class in 11th grade. Rowan says she was already aware that James Ewell Brown Stuart fought as Confederate general during the Civil War, but it wasn't until she took that history class that she heard her high school **had received its moniker in the 1950s as a protest to federal efforts to integrate schools.** That realization inspired Rowan, her classmate Lydia Ananuel, and three other J.E.B. Stuart High School students to start a campaign to change their school's name. Since they launched their efforts with a video shown during their film class in June 2015, the students' push to rename J.E.B. Stuart High School gained both local and national attention until the Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) board agreed to explore the possibility of a change in February."*

The third Anxiety measure **Cognition** could be expected to impact a student's ability to remember key features of the traumatic event; or in creating negative thoughts about oneself or the world (similar to a "Past negative mindset"); or in carrying distorted guilt or blame feelings or showing a reduced interest in once-enjoyable activities; perhaps student's "turning off" to their once positive history lessons.

**Impact on J.E.B. Stuart Virginia History/Social Science Grades** (Source: <https://goo.gl/DlxNxm>)

Stuart produced the lowest **Virginia History** pass rate in the County in 2013/14 at **84%** and by 2015/16 - during the height of the attack pass rates fell to **81%**. Meanwhile, both of the school's World History course pass rates went up resulting in an **8% divergent spread** between Virginia History vs. World History pass rates. This divergent trend suggests that the Virginia course isn't being taught routinely, that course material changed or that students are experiencing the "Avoidance" to the subject *as predicted by the Anxiety reaction*. We can see the evidence of change in class teaching as detailed in the 2015 news coverage (above) when elements of the NAACP's "change" material (Va. Racism/White Supremacy, Bad School Board, etc.) made it into Stuart's Virginia History coursework.

**Did the addition of "Change" campaign material correlate to a Racial Divide at Stuart?**



Virginia requires students complete year end standardized tests in History and Social Science. These results may be compared year over year and school by school. On this finding we used nearby confederate themed R. E. Lee H.S. as a reasonable comparison. With polarizing race-

based messaging suggesting J.E.B. Stuart was a “White Supremacist” or that the 1958 Fairfax School Board worked to ‘intimidate black students via the name selection’ making its way into Stuart the Zimbardo or Anxiety predictions suggest that we would expect to see a pass rate drop off in pass rate among Stuart’s Black students (N=207) relative to Lee’s Black students (N=256) who did not experience such divisive rhetoric. Overall, we see that Lee performs better than Stuart overall on the History/S.S. SOL tests.

However when racial groups are identified we see a couple of interesting occurrences. First, in 2014/15 both Stuart’s Black and White students performed better than Lee’s Black and White Students despite the overall better performance by Lee on these subjects. However, a full year into the change campaign we see significant changes. First, Stuart’s Black students suffered the largest pass rate drop at -7%; the largest percentage loss in the county. Meanwhile, Stuart’s White students went the opposite way and gained +4% thus providing for an one year 11% divergence creating a 13% gap between the groups which previously – in 2014/15 – had only a 2% difference.

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During the same period, both of Lee's Black and White student’s pass rates went up exactly the same in gaining +5% year over year. This strong parallel suggests there was consistency in the History/S.S. teaching method and/or class room materials presented at Lee.

### **Did the “Change” campaign correlate to Behavior or Substance Abuse changes?**

The PTSD/Anxiety and Zimbardo “Past Negative Mindset” predictions suggest that students caught in the change campaign would experience Type 1) Behavior or Type 2) Substance Abuse issues. In examining Stuart we can again compare Lee to Stuart regarding the trends and differences in student’s use of **Alcohol, Tobacco** and their **Drug and Disorderly/Disruptive Behavior** offenses.

Looking at year over year differences each school registered increases in each of the Type 1 and Type 2 events with Stuart seeing a **+177%** jump in Type 1 and a **+37%** in Type 2 offenses. Meanwhile Lee experienced moderate increases in Type 1 at **+31%** and Type 2 at **+13%**.

While there may be other, non-change influences promoting differences in each school’s increases in each type of offense, the percentage jump in Stuart’s “offenses” dwarfs Lee’s by +146% and +34% respectively. This rapid increase strongly suggests that an anxiety producing *event* took place at Stuart that radically altered the year-over-year offense numbers.

## Did the introduction of “Change” campaign correlate to “Absence” or “Dropout” changes?

A key characteristic of the Anxiety disorder is “avoidance” of an event-related issue while Zimbardo’s “Past Negative Mindset” suggests affected students would have less energy, more depression and would have less consideration of “*future consequences*”.

The differences between Stuart and Lee’s “absence” and “drop-out rates” might suggest the presence of an Anxiety and/or Past Negative producing event at either school when looking at year over year changes between schools. Lee H.S., in this measure, should be considered the baseline of a normal school due, in part, to its more consistent History/S.S. SOL pass rate findings and its less radical rise in “offenses” (among others) while still being a “Confederate Themed” Fairfax Co. High School.

What we see is that Lee’s year over year “aggressive / more than 20% missed” absence rate for Black Students went down **-3.2%** while Stuart’s went up **+9.1%** over the same period thus producing a noteworthy 12.3% “severe absence” gap between the schools. Interestingly, Stuart’s “White” students – once logging more “severe” absences than their Black peers in 2014/2015 – were overtaken in 2015/2016 by the Black students who jumped ahead by **+2.9%** during the name change campaign year.

In looking at dropouts, we see that Lee had a decrease in dropouts **-.2%** dropout while Stuart experienced a **+2.7%** increase year over year again suggesting there was a significant event – or series of events - at Stuart compared to Lee which triggered elements of both the Anxiety and/or the “Past Negative Mindset” outcomes.

## Summary

The year over year pre/post NAACP-sponsored “name change” campaign findings suggest that the divisive rhetoric had a significant and measurable detrimental impact on the Stuart student’s physical, mental and academic measures as provided by the Fairfax County and Virginia State academic data.

When considering negative impacts on race, clearly Black students suffered more negatively under the NAACP’s narrative than other racial groups when looking at both intra-and-inter school (Stuart vs. Lee) findings. Moreover, in that the majority of the anti-name campaign rhetoric (such as John Brown was an African American and that JEB Stuart was a “traitor” and “hated black people”) was so unapologetically wrong, unproven or bombastic such that nearly 90 percent of Stuart students who did not vote to change the name in the spring of 2016. Indeed, such divisive rhetoric by the spring of 2017 reduced the numbers of students who would even “opt into” neutrally engaging with the NAACP-sponsored student activists called “Student’s for Change” as demonstrated in an official school board committee [report](#).

The drop off in Stuart student “buy in” is part of a national trend where bombastic, hyperbolic or simply untrue change narratives have become so predictable as to now earn immediate dismissals. A Texas school superintendent being marketed by such a national group declared: *“Changing [our name] would be tapering down to political correctness of leftist extremists and we’re not going to do that here,” that campaign immediately died and [did not return](#).*

Indeed, overplayed narratives portrayed are being presented in movies and television as material for mockery. HBO’s Bill Maher [ridiculed](#) activists twice this season pointing out the absurdity of groupies acting offended on behalf of others who aren’t and a recently released High School-themed [movie](#) featured a segment dedicated to the absurdity of forced name change. Indeed, even some of the Stuart students have launched a national [petition](#) to have the Fairfax school board replace its own name by showcasing that Lord Thomas Fairfax held and traded 100s of slaves and even took time to amuse himself by “bedding down with a negro wench”.

While the Stuart student’s approach may not save their school name a moderated approach was demonstrated when Princeton University rejected a 2016 movement to rename President Woodrow Wilson School but did modify the school to include “broadening the historic landscape” by including a wider variety of icons, art and tributes. The Trustee’s decision [report](#) read:

*“Contextualization is imperative. Princeton must openly and candidly recognize that Wilson, like other historical figures, leaves behind a complex legacy with both positive and negative repercussions, and that the use of his name implies no endorsement of views and actions that conflict with the values and aspirations of our times.”* The [statement noted](#): *“[the] decision to honor Wilson’s record of service, while simultaneously educating the community on his controversial positions, embodied one of the most basic tenets of a liberal arts education; deriving knowledge from complex issues that cannot be reduced to simple binary terms.”*