

To: The Trustees of the BOUSD

From: Dena (Edmonson) Sommer, Past BOUSD Trustee, 1983-1988

Re: Possible Fanning Elementary School Name Change

Date: November 3, 2018

More than a year ago, when I first became aware of the debate over possibly renaming Fanning Elementary School, my first response was, "I'm sure glad I'm no longer serving on the school board!" After all, who chooses to be in the middle of a cultural mêlée where there are two legitimate, albeit conflicting concerns, expressed by people who have deep personal feelings about the topic? The answer is that you knew you could end up being involved in controversies when you decided to run for election to the school board. So what will you decide and what will prompt you make that decision?

Advocates for retaining the Fanning Elementary School name point out, with deep sincerity and numerous examples, the many good deeds known to have been part of the legacy of William E. Fanning, the school's namesake.

Advocates for removing the Fanning name from the school share heartfelt examples of times they or others have experienced racism, be those events recent or in the past.

The two advocacies intersect regarding the allegations or disavowals that William E. Fanning was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. This is clearly a situation that offers more questions than it does answers.

It appears that if you make the decision to change the school's name, it might be more expedient to do so now, since Fanning School has been in the process of redefining itself as a magnet school focusing on technology. But would that expediency actually be helpful? Did the school board consider changing Laurel Elementary School's name when it became a magnet school?

Should the board decide to change the school's name, the question of why would often, if not always, arise. Would you choose to tarnish the name of a man who not only did so much good, but was also never accused nor found guilty of a crime? The deceased cannot sue for slander, but we might ask ourselves if it is morally right to defame an individual based on the allegation that, because he may have been on a KKK membership list, he, therefore, must have committed racist acts.

Hypothetically, we might also ask ourselves how we all would behave if Fanning Elementary School had originally been named "George Washington Elementary

School?” Would the fact that George Washington owned slaves in the 18th century negate Washington’s considerable accomplishments?

Now, in the 21st century, would a name change for that hypothetical “Washington” school be requested? George Washington is quite possibly America’s ultimate icon. William E. Fanning, a local icon, had a school named after him by 1970’s-era trustees. We can all learn from each of these icons, for both their good deeds and their flaws, be they real or imagined. After all, we ourselves have been both charitable and flawed. We must look at and learn from the past with open eyes. Also, we might consider the example we want to set for the future and then ask ourselves, “How harshly will our progeny in the coming years of the 21st century judge us when we know the nobility of our intents?”

It may help to remember words often attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt: “Yesterday is history; tomorrow is a mystery; and today is a gift, which is why we call it the present.”

The mystery here is what your early 21st century decision will be:

- 1) Will you be “expedient”?
- 2) Will you take into account the original naming choice that was made by the trustees during the mid 20th century?
- 3) Will you, in the 21st century, through policies and practices, continue to ensure that racism will not occur in any BOUSD school?

From my own personal experience as a trustee who served during the contentious period when Brea citizens feverously debated keeping the old high school versus building a new one, I realize that you may have access to more information than I do. I respect our community’s educational leadership selection process and know that you will give, as you have done multiple times over the past year, due consideration to the ideas and concerns of all advocates.

Whatever you decide, my gift to you today is to share that I will support your decision, whatever that may be, but I would request that, once made, you will kindly share your rationale.

In the broadest cultural sense, we must continue to make a strong effort to combat racism in any form. Maybe, at heart, both advocates in this issue actually have the same goal. It’s the path to that goal that’s in question.

The fact is that this issue is not owned by you alone as trustees. Thus, I write to you today – more than a year after this debate began – for it is incumbent upon every member of the community to ensure that now and in the future, every child and every member of the community is treated with respect and is provided equal opportunities.

That is what Brea has represented to me over the 68 years of my personal experience with Brea and its schools. That is what makes me proud to be a member of this community. That is why I specifically chose to have my sons attend Fanning Elementary School back in the 1970's.

The bottom line is this: Fanning Elementary School, by any name, will continue to be an outstanding, exemplary school.

Respectfully,

Dena Sommer