

# Albemarle School Administrator Lawsuit Heard in U.S. District Court

January 6, 2023



*United States Court House.*

The U.S. District Court for the Western District of Virginia heard arguments on December 15 in the case of Emily Mais v. Albemarle County School Board, originally filed in April of this year. Mais is a former assistant principal at Agnor-Hurt Elementary School in Albemarle County and has taught for 17 years both here and elsewhere. She claims that she experienced severe and pervasive racial harassment at the hands of Agnor-Hurt staff during and after a required anti-racism teacher training session at the school, and the harassment ultimately compelled her to resign from her job to preserve her mental health.

In the complaint, Mais contends that over the course of a required “Courageous Conversations about Race” teacher training in 2021, she became disturbed by what she felt were racially discriminatory training materials, and that she fielded similar concerns from other teachers. During the final session, Mais inadvertently used the phrase “colored people” instead of “people of color,” and immediately and repeatedly apologized to all present. She was then verbally attacked by teacher’s aide Sheila Avery, who called her an “old racist” and said she did not accept the apology.

Following the training incident, Mais claims that she was subjected to months of increasingly hostile and vulgar attacks (such as being openly called a “two-faced white racist b—”) from staff members, as well as physical intimidation, and that multiple requests for help from school and division administrators were ignored. Mais was asked to (and did) apologize again in several other meetings and mediation sessions, culminating in a mandatory meeting of all the school’s teachers, where she was required to read an apology statement that had been significantly abridged by school division staff. After Mais’s statement, Avery was invited to speak and demanded that teachers choose a side—hers or Mais’s. Mais submitted her resignation at the end of August.

## **Defense Arguments**

In the December hearing, attorney Jeremy Capps, representing the Albemarle County School Board, defended a motion to dismiss the complaint on the basis that citizens generally cannot sue any level of government—including school districts or their employees. Capps said that under Virginia’s constitution, the government and its agencies are immune from such claims under a doctrine called “sovereign immunity,” and any waiver of sovereign immunity has to be explicit, and can only be granted by the government.

“There is no mechanism in Virginia law by which the plaintiff could pursue a monetary remedy for violation of the constitution,” said Capps, adding that

retaliation is not covered as discrimination by the Virginia Human Rights Commission. "The real issue in this case is whether the plaintiff has alleged enough for a 'hostile work environment' under Title Seven." Mais claims that the harassment made it impossible for her to continue working at the school, so the School Board was willfully negligent and "constructively discharged" her, in violation of her constitutional rights.

In arguing against the constructive discharge claim, Capps said that Mais was "only" called a "two-faced white racist b—" twice after the training session, according to the complaint. "She didn't like the fact that she was asked to apologize, but that doesn't make a hostile work environment," he said. Neither side disputes that Mais immediately apologized for her misstatement, and reiterated her apology several times.

Capps also acknowledged that now-retired Bernard Hairston, who was at the time Assistant Superintendent for School Community Empowerment, described the anti-racism policy to Mais in a mediation meeting where Avery was present, and in that context he said, "You're either on the bus or you're not. You are either a racist or an anti-racist." Capps also noted that then-Director of Educator Quality Daphne Keiser said it was inappropriate for Hairston to have conducted a mediation meeting without any human resources persons present.

However, none of this was enough to create a situation that could amount to constructive discharge, said Capps. "She cannot use her own objections to the policy, or her own offensive statements that cause conflict within the workplace between coworkers, as the basis for a hostile work environment claim," he said. "It's just not enough."

Judge Norman K. Moon followed up by asking what would be enough. "I mean, when are you going to let up?" said Moon. "At what point will [the punishment] be enough? What amount is the [appropriate] public punishment of someone for wrongdoing?"

“But that’s the problem with the allegations in this complaint,” replied Capps, “because she didn’t let it play out. She resigned before she gave the [public, all-staff] apology.”

“That’s my point,” said Moon. “Is it normal that one would be required to stand before that body and apologize? You know, the [original] comment wasn’t to that body. Is that an overreaction [by division administrators]? Is that why Human Resources said they should have been involved in mediation, because they might not have required that type of thing? If she should be disciplined for what she said, was this the appropriate discipline?”

Capps suggested again that Mais should have endured the hostile treatment for longer to see how it might have “played out.” “She short-cutted that process by resigning before the apology, so we couldn’t watch that play out —this might be a completely different situation if [instead] she had gone into that meeting, had not resigned, made an apology, and the treatment continued and Miss Avery refused to accept her apology. But that’s not what’s alleged, and that didn’t happen because she resigned before it could happen.”

## **Plaintiff Arguments**

Mais’s counsel, Hal Frampton of Alliance Defending Freedom, said that Mais was “subjected by the school district to an environment infused with racial hostility from top to bottom,” and asked the court to look at five elements to determine sufficiently severe pervasive hostility: (1) the content of the Courageous Conversations curriculum, which “trades in crude racial stereotypes,” (2) racist comments made by Hairston, including his “comparison of white parents to slave owners who had raped his mother and sister and beaten him and were now telling him not to talk about it,” (3) the implementation of the curriculum at Agnor-Hurt Elementary, in which white participants were repeatedly told that their perspectives were not welcome, (4) the district’s treatment of Mais in contrast to how it handled the behavior

of her co-workers, who cursed at her and intimidated her friends and physically blocked them from visiting her office, with no repercussions, and (5) the refusal of seven different school division officials, including Principal Michael Irani, to intervene during the ongoing racial harassment of Mais by co-workers from June 11 to her last day on September 9;

“School administrators allowed teacher’s aides who were people of color to attend the all-faculty public apology meeting to be seated in the front row, dressed in black t-shirts and camo pants, to intimidate [Mais], while specifically not inviting white teacher’s aides,” said Frampton. “They allowed a teacher’s aide who had harassed Mais to essentially give a rebuttal after Mais’ apology, where she continued to call Mais a racist.”

Regarding the immunity claims, Frampton said, “It’s unlawful for an employer to discriminate against employees and employment agencies, to discriminate because of engaging in protected activity.” He also argued that Mais was acting in some ways outside the scope of her employment “by reaching out affirmatively, raising these issues many times in places when she’s absolutely not required to do so, speaking as a citizen on a matter of public concern.” This latter approach may trigger an exception from sovereign immunity in Virginia.

Judge Moon did not indicate when he would make a decision on the motion to dismiss.

# School Board to Decide Whether 7 + 1 > 8

December 8, 2023



In an effort to reduce stress levels among high school teachers and students, Albemarle County Public Schools (ACPS) is considering adopting a “7+1” academic schedule to replace its current eight-period schedule for all county high schools. Also referred to as a “seven academic” schedule, the concept has been bandied about for more than five years and typically garners a roughly 50-50 split in support among both students and teachers. A recent push by school division officials to address the proposal will culminate in a decision on whether or not to adopt the schedule change for the 2024-25 school year at the School Board’s December meeting.

High school students currently take eight courses per year in an A-B alternating schedule, attending four 80-85 minute classes one day and four others the next, so that all eight are completed over two school days. (Each

school also offers an additional 30-40 minute “intervention” period every day for students to receive extra help as needed.) The proposed 7+1 schedule would convert one class (or block) into a mandatory “flex” period, and all teachers and students would have that same block open.

## Increased Opportunities for Remediation or Enrichment

### Current state:

- The remediation block is often compromised by clubs or surveys, or it is only scheduled four days a week.
- Teachers can only work with study hall students if their scheduled study hall aligns with a teacher’s planning block

### Changes under 7 Academic Schedule:

- Guaranteed daily time for students to meet with teachers
- Surveys, clubs, and grade level seminars will be moved to a guaranteed scheduled block

*Slide from the ACPS Seven Academic Schedule presentation to the School Board on November 9.*

The flex period would serve as a kind of multi-purpose study hall during which students could seek help from teachers, retake tests, gather in clubs, or participate in enrichment activities, even as the current intervention period remains in place. According to division administrators, the “+1” would provide crucial mental health support to the entire high school population.

“Right now, high school teachers teach ‘six of eight’ class periods (with two planning periods), and they are also available to students during the regular intervention time,” said Jay Thomas, ACPS’s Director of Secondary Education. “Teachers are really stressed right now, as their planning periods are often taken up with required meetings and trainings, and so they don’t have a lot of time. The Bellwether (instructional audit) report stresses the need to increase rigor, and teachers say they can do that by reducing their

stress." Under the 7+1 schedule, teachers would teach 'five of seven' academic periods (retaining the two planning periods) and would supervise a set of fifteen or so students during the (+1) flex block.

## Results of the 2021-2022 Secondary Student Check-In Survey

12(d) pursue personal interests such as clubs, intramural sports, or specialized electives				
1 - Not Important	67	1	4.41%	
2	162	2	10.66%	
3	479	3	31.53%	
4 - Very Important	811	4	53.39%	
				<b>Weighted Score: 3.34</b>
12(e) advisory (i.e. freshman seminar or structured non-academic time)				
1 - Not Important	447	1	29.33%	
2	525	2	34.45%	
3	353	3	23.16%	
4 - Very Important	100	4	6.06%	
				<b>Weighted Score: 2.20</b>
Q13. How much would moving to a seven academic period schedule (7 + 1) improve students' academic mental health?				
Answer	Responses	Value	%	Percentage of total respondents
1 - Worsen	234	1	17.17%	
2 - About the Same	455	2	33.38%	
3 - Improve A Little	459	3	33.68%	
4 - Improve A Lot	215	4	15.77%	
				<b>Weighted Score: 2.48</b>

83% of students served felt that moving to a 7 Academic Schedule would feel the same or improve their academic mental health.

7  
Academic  
Schedule

Slide from the ACPS Seven Academic Schedule presentation to the School Board on November 9.

Division officials say the original move up to the current eight-period schedule happened abruptly in 2010-11 when the School Board was under budget pressure to reduce costs, so the proposed switch can be viewed as righting a historic wrong. "Fourteen years ago, the board decided—overnight and without public input, without school input—to move to a four-by-four to save money," said Thomas. "They never saved the money. What they did is they got every high school teacher teaching an extra class for free. So, the biggest benefit [of changing back to seven academic periods] that I see from a teacher perspective is the reduction of that extra class presentation and the increase in built-in time they have with students to go deeper into things to help them."

## Concerns About Student Choice



While some teachers agree that the move would relieve their own stress and improve student outcomes, others think that neither the plan nor its potential knock-on effects have been sufficiently examined or explained. Monticello High School band director Michael Strickler spoke during the public comment period at the November 9 School Board meeting where the 7+1 schedule was presented. He urged the board not to implement “this poorly designed schedule change.”

“I’m concerned with the lack of student elective choice and scheduling that will come from this change,” said Strickler. “This will cause many courses to not be offered in our schools, specifically [Career and Technical Education] classes that have hard caps on student enrollment, and performing arts classes where teachers like myself teach six distinct preps that we’ll have to drop to five, therefore eliminating an elective course offering. [The 7+1] schedule will drop the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> grades down to one elective each year, meaning that we’ll have a system in which students cannot achieve high levels of specialization in electives because of ACPS’ mandated non-curricular class time.”

### 2023-2024 Student Enrollment in Study Hall

School	Grade	Total	School	Grade	Total	School	Grade	Total
Albemarle	9	67 13%	Monticello	9	2 1%	Western Albemarle	9	24 8%
Albemarle	10	149 30%	Monticello	10	33 12%	Western Albemarle	10	190 63%
Albemarle	11	203 40%	Monticello	11	179 61%	Western Albemarle	11	220 74%
Albemarle	12	353 76%	Monticello	12	249 85%	Western Albemarle	12	223 88%

Slide from the ACPS Seven Academic Schedule presentation to the School Board on November 9.

In a subsequent interview, Strickler also suggested that the plan is not the panacea for teachers that many believe. "If the administration could tell me that I'll teach five classes with three planning periods, then yes, I would be 100% behind this change," he said. "But what they're saying is, 'You'll teach one less class but you'll still be responsible for a group of students for an entire [additional] period.' The new block is supposed to take care of seven or eight different things—teacher planning for required trainings, student enrichment, remediation [and test retakes], clubs, and somehow even some electives can fit in there. They say it'll work out fine, but they don't say how."

The switch will present logistical challenges, especially as the division encourages students to move between existing high schools and new high school centers, internships, and career learning locations where they might not be able to take advantage of their home school's flex period. The vaunted Freshman Seminar, a required full-year class launched in 2018 with the aim of helping first-year high schoolers discover their academic passions and talents, will be relegated to the flex block and significantly reduced in scope. Teachers who are assigned freshman students in their flex period will presumably be responsible for presenting seminar content during that time.

"Maybe we'll re-envision Freshman Seminar altogether and just bring back the transition piece along with the social-emotional piece," said Thomas. "And maybe it's not a class [but rather] a series of experiences the freshmen do in their first couple of weeks. I think we have a lot of flexibility with that."

Vernon Liechti, an Albemarle High School teacher and president of the Albemarle Education Association, a group which has been advocating for the School Board to allow ACPS employees to collectively bargain, said his sense is that teachers are divided on the 7+1 plan. "Based on talking to people in my building, the teachers who were here 15 years ago definitely want to go back to that plan, but the electives teachers worry that their programs won't be able to maintain their student participation rates or to grow," said Liechti. "For me, it comes down to this—if the division wants to

keep [an 8-class schedule], okay, but then we'd like our compensation for that extra prep that we never received."

## **Staff Analysis of 7+1 Plan**

The ACPS Office of Strategic Planning staff produced a study of the viability of the proposed schedule in the fall of 2022. The report presented the results of surveys of students' and teachers' opinions of the plan showing splits among each group. Using weighted scores where respondents expressed their opinion on a 7-point scale in which 4 meant no preference, core teachers slightly preferred the 7+1 schedule (4.5) and electives teachers leaned toward keeping the current schedule (3.77).

While students said that a schedule that allows them to meet with teachers, complete make-up work, and pursue interests such as clubs and intramural sports was "very important" to them, more than 50% said that moving to a 7+1 schedule would either have no effect on students' academic mental health or would make it worse, and only 16% said it would improve their mental health a lot.

The report also studied the proposal's impact on class size, and said that for staff to move to teaching five academic classes instead of six while remaining budget neutral, class sizes would increase. Using an example of the 230 sections of high school English currently taught across the division, enrolling a total of 4,215 students, the report calculated that average class size would have to increase by 4 students per class, from 18 to 22. Thomas said that those increases could be managed within the master schedule that each school arranges, and that the release of Freshman Seminar teachers from those duties would ameliorate the class size impact.



*Jennifer Sublette, Western Albemarle High School Principal. Photo: Malcolm Andrews.*

A central question with the 7+1 schedule is how students will benefit beyond the flexibility they already have with a daily intervention period and optional study halls. Thomas' presentation to the School Board showed, for example, that a majority of 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders at Western Albemarle High School (WAHS) are taking a study hall this year—88% of seniors are taking at least one and sometimes more than one. That means that 12%—and a higher percentage at the other two high schools and in lower grades—prefer the option to take a full schedule including the attendant elective choices it provides.


Why, then, require a study hall for every student? The school division division's answer is that the flex block must be open for all students and teachers at the same time, allowing for coordinated activities such as remediation and enrichment. At least in part, the need for a dedicated open block seems to be a consequence of the division's own post-pandemic

policy of allowing students to take and re-take assessments as often as they wish, which requires both extra time and teacher availability.

WAHS principal Jennifer Sublette described trying to balance student needs with the 7+1 modification. "There is a subset of students who might be really trying to load up [on classes] as much as they can," she said, "and we have to be creative to help support them and not discount that at all. But we also need to build a structure that's healthy and sustainable for the larger group. Our Warrior [intervention] period is only 35 minutes, and kids need more time because of some of the changes in the grading and re-take policies. Many of our assessments, especially in our AP classes, are longer than that, so if we have a block that better matches how long they really need, that's super helpful."

Sublette said she plans to get a jump on planning for the change. "I've told my teachers, if we go to 7+1, the first thing we'll do is create a work team that starts designing now what that block looks like," she said. "We'll map it out—how do we organize the kids, what are the ways we can create space and time for teachers to work with small groups versus large groups? That kind of design work is the fun of building a high school schedule."

Ultimately, the division staff who wrote last year's report advised against implementing the 7+1 schedule. They instead suggested "monitoring the class of 2026 [this year's sophomores] to determine the effects of changes already implemented—including the removal of weighted grades, the cap on AP courses, the introduction of career learning communities, and the alignment of high school schedules—on student success and academic mental health." Monticello's Strickler similarly advocates for a "pause."



*ay Thomas, ACPS Director of Secondary Education, speaking at the November 9 School Board meeting. Photo: ACPS.*

“We need modern, up-to-date data before jumping into such a drastic change,” said Strickler. “Our current remediation enrichment programs, like Mustang Morning at Monticello, have the potential to work better than throwing out the baby with the bathwater by creating an entirely new schedule.”

At its December 14 meeting, the School Board will hear the results of new teacher and student surveys that were taken during the week after Thanksgiving break. They then will decide whether to implement, postpone, or reject the 7+1 schedule for all county high schools.

# School Renaming Process Denounced as Improper

February 3, 2023



*Karen Waters, the ACPS director of community education at the School Board's January 12 meeting.*

The Albemarle County School Board approved Superintendent Matt Haas' recommendation to change the name of Meriwether Lewis Elementary School to Ivy Elementary at the board's January 12 meeting. Karen Waters, the school division's director of community education who served as project manager for the name review committee, said during the meeting that "While we recognize that no one is perfect, we were not able to align the name ... with the [division's] values based on the information that was garnered from the committee's research as well as my own."

Though the School Board vote to implement the change was unanimous, the 12-member name advisory committee itself was strongly divided, and

several committee members have characterized the division's handling of the process as "disingenuous" and its final decision "unrepresentative." "There has been a lack of trust with both the committee and the community members in this process, with evidence of manipulation and a lack of transparency," said committee member Brandon Lindsey during the meeting's public comment period.



*MLS is now Ivy Elementary*

Though Lindsey told the board that committee members were "appalled" by Waters' treatment of them during their service, and that nine of the twelve members were "manipulated to achieve a desired end state," no School Board member inquired about his comments or asked Waters follow-up questions about the deliberation and voting processes. Meriwether Lewis School (MLS) is the fifth county school to be renamed out of eight reviews



over the last four years, with six more reviews yet to be conducted.

## Protocol

Albemarle County Public Schools (ACPS) has a policy for the renaming of a school facility that includes instructions for the name review committee. The committee's tasks are straightforward:

1. send out an initial survey to elicit potential school names, including retaining the original school name, and briefly describe the namesake's contributions and attributes;
2. hold a public meeting to obtain public comments on any of the suggested names;
3. select five semi-final names;
4. send out a second survey asking for community preferences on those names;
5. hold a second public meeting for any further public comment;
6. narrow the list to three names and, if the original name is on the list, conduct research on that person's life and whether their conduct exemplifies the School Board's values;
7. considering all the information gathered, make a final selection of a name to recommend to the Superintendent, who then recommends a name to the School Board.

The policy states that "If the Committee is unable to make a final recommendation, the Superintendent shall select the final name to be submitted to the School Board from the three final naming candidates."

Waters served as the non-voting project manager for the MLS name review, a support role external to the committee. "The role is primarily to help provide guidance, and to make sure that the committee has all the information that they need so that they're able to adhere to the policy, and to help them with their timetable and things of that nature," said Waters. "Their

meetings were closed, so I was available by phone if they had questions."

The committee sent out its first and second surveys on October 24 and November 14, and held two public meetings on November 9 and November 29. Per the policy, they narrowed its list to three names and researched Lewis's life, consulting books, historical documents, and videos, and compiled what members learned into a shared Google document.

Seth Lovell, a committee member and parent of Meriwether Lewis students, described the process as keenly focused on community sentiment. "The Superintendent's staff really pushed the idea that we had to initiate and put together these surveys and encourage people to take them. It was all about the surveys and the public forum, and so our process and many of our conversations were wrapped up in that."

The two community surveys showed that 94% of polled respondents knew for whom the school was named or were familiar with his life and career, and 85% selected Meriwether Lewis as their first choice for the school name, with over 400 constituents responding to each survey. Of the 25 emails the committee received and the various comments from members of the public who spoke at the two forums, none were in favor of changing the name. A further school-wide survey of MLS students showed the name Meriwether Lewis Elementary was preferred by 160 out of 321 students, twice as many as the 77 who voted for second-place Ivy Elementary.

## Recommendation

After a split vote, the committee recommends retaining the name Meriwether Lewis Elementary. These members stated this name embodies the values of Albemarle County Public Schools of **Equity, Excellence, Wellness, Family & Community** based on following:

- Meriwether Lewis treated all members of his discovery team which included enslaved and indigenous persons with dignity and respect.
- Meriwether Lewis was a lifelong learner and demonstrated the characteristics of courage, curiosity, resilience, perseverance, and determination which is what we desire for our students.
- Meriwether Lewis was a leader, scientist, explorer, veteran, writer and artist.
- A large number of school community and students indicated interest in retaining the name

*Recommendation slide prepared by the Meriwether Lewis School renaming committee after its 9-3 vote to retain the school name.*

"The committee had very little opportunity to have meaningful conversations, so when we got to the point where they wanted us to make a recommendation, we recommended keeping the name," said Lovell. He said that the committee checked with Waters as to whether the vote had to be unanimous, and she said it did not. On December 1, the committee voted nine to three to keep the Meriwether Lewis name, and forwarded that recommendation to Waters, assuming it would be sent to the Superintendent as prescribed by the renaming policy. (See above image of the committee's prepared recommendation slide.)

## Portrayal

Instead of sending the committee's decision on, Waters held it and conducted her own research. "After the committee completed its work, I was compiling a report of their work," she said. "As I looked through their research information, I came across some things that made my eyebrows rise. In checking the references, I came across some information that was

not quite so flattering [to Lewis]." That information, rather than the committee's research, became the basis for Waters' report to the division.

The MLS naming decision was to be announced at the December 8 School Board meeting, but the meeting came and went with no announcement, and committee members asked what was going on. "We asked to see the presentation that was going to be given to the School Board, and when they sent us the draft, we were shocked," said Charles Timko, a MLS community member serving on the committee. "It did not contain the majority of the information that we spent a lot of time researching. Instead, what was included was completely unrepresentative of our work, very biased and one-sided, making Lewis seem like a tyrant or a monster."

The report highlighted Lewis' 1795 court-martial for drunkenness (for which he was acquitted), his family's wealth and ownership of enslaved persons, an outstanding debt he owed upon his death, and a quote from a UVA historian stating that Lewis and Clark statues are "monuments to white supremacy." The report left out most of the details of Lewis' life, such as the government offices he held, his relationships with indigenous Native American tribes, and the Corps of Discovery expedition for which he is most well-known.

Waters said her interpretation of the policy was that "if we don't have a unanimous vote, then we need three names [to send to the Superintendent]." But the policy's language makes no mention of unanimity and requires only a recommendation, which had been provided. Waters said she saw the committee's recommendation as insufficient.

"I guess the question is, in interpreting the policy, what constitutes agreement?" she said. "And when you have a committee and you have three people disagree, then you don't really have agreement, and so then there's not agreement on one name." Waters said that "three names weren't given, so we had to reconvene in order to get two additional name suggestions."

## **Pressure point**

The committee was then called to attend a mandatory in-person meeting, though such a meeting was outside the provisions of the renaming policy. Waters and Superintendent Haas, along with Deputy Superintendent Daphne Keiser, were present at the meeting despite the fact that the committee would be asked to re-vote, and past meetings had been closed per division policy. At least four committee members were employed by the school system, and the administrators all held director-level positions above them.

Members said they were first shown a video TED-talk about “the power of stories” and asked how it made them feel. Waters then gave a lengthy speech about her own personal story and presented a slideshow about Lewis’s life, which members said portrayed him in an entirely negative light. Finally, Keiser, who was not introduced, read the school division’s anti-racism policy aloud to the committee.

Lindsey says that he and others on the committee were taken aback by the division’s tactics and felt they were being lectured to. “It was clear that the vote didn’t go the way they wanted,” he said. “We received a block of ‘re-training’ on diversity and anti-racism, and then were immediately told to re-vote. They basically tried to shame us into changing our vote without any opportunity to reconvene as a committee to discuss what we’d heard.”

The meeting, scheduled for one hour, stretched past two. Committee members were given blank ballots and told to re-vote, but one member left the meeting and another refused. With the administrators still present, three members switched their vote to support changing the name, and the committee was instructed to vote again on three names to be forwarded to the Superintendent.

“It was a sham,” said Timko. “Here you are, trapped in a meeting with people who are basically strong-arming you to ‘correct’ [your vote]. It was crystal clear that the intention was always to change the school name, [so much so that] they had to change procedure and bully us into it. It was upsetting to watch people being treated with such contempt by public officials.”

Waters said she was merely passing on supplementary information. "The purpose of that last meeting was to have them understand what some of the other additional research was presenting, and to give them another opportunity to be able to vote and perhaps offer additional names," said Waters.

"We did feel it was necessary for the committee to have an understanding of the anti-racism policy, because part of our research did uncover that Meriwether Lewis came from a family that enslaved individuals, and for many in the community, that's sort of a nonstarter in terms of whether or not that individual would fit into the value that we described as equity in our school policy," said Waters. "But there are many areas in which Meriwether Lewis didn't fit the rubric besides equity. He had no family to speak of but what he was born into, he didn't have children. He was a very transient individual. It was widely accepted and publicized that he had a number of health issues."

*The Meriwether Lewis School renaming committee and public speakers at their November 9 public meeting over Zoom.*

The Gazette reached out to six other members of the name review committee for their perspective on the renaming process, and each declined, did not respond, or would not speak on the record. The division's communications director, Phil Giaramita, did not make Superintendent Haas available for comment.

MLS principal and committee member Jennifer Underwood said, "The name Ivy Elementary School recognizes how important the community around us always will be to the success of our students. Moving forward, I am eager to build on this partnership, including finding new ways for our parents and our neighbors to be involved in our work." When asked about the concerns raised by the parents and community members on the committee, she said she had "nothing to add."

## Post hoc

Lovell said the experience has left him questioning division leadership. "As a parent with children in the schools, we've had a very positive experience," he said. "The administration of Meriwether Lewis is phenomenal and the teachers have been wonderful. But what's disappointing for me is that I now really question the larger school district and its leadership, and honestly, I have some concerns about the School Board as well."

Though Lovell had spoken at length to his district's School Board representative, Graham Paige, about his concerns before the School Board meeting, Paige did not bring up those concerns to his fellow board members during the meeting. "Why did none of the School Board members raise the question of why there was not a single representative from Meriwether Lewis Elementary School [at the meeting], as there has been in other renaming announcements?" said Lovell.

Reflecting on the process, Lovell wishes there had been more substantive and interactive discussion about the name change throughout the committee's tenure, as well as better transparency from the division. "It's clear that the Superintendent's office had a very strong opinion about the history of Meriwether Lewis and about how having a school named Meriwether Lewis stood in opposition to their anti-racism policy," said Lovell. "So, if they were going to essentially tell us, 'No, that's not the right answer,' then I wish they would have said that from the start."

"The [renaming] process is disingenuous to the community that it is supposed to serve," said Timko. "It signals to those who spoke at the meetings and to the hundreds that completed the surveys that their opinions mean nothing. It demeans the good intentions of committee members by treating them as props. Ultimately, when the organizers realized they weren't getting their preferred outcome, they abused their position of power. It is truly unfortunate that the voices of the community we were tasked to



represent were silenced and discarded so callously."

At the School Board meeting where the name change was announced, several suggestions were made by both Waters and board members to "tweak" the name review policy going forward. Waters suggested that votes must be unanimous or the Superintendent will make the decision, that there be one committee to handle the remaining six reviews, and that research on the namesake's life be compiled in advance by division staff and given to the committee up front, along with anti-racism information.

Board member Kate Acuff suggested that no description of the namesake be given on the first community survey, and Ellen Osborne said the policy needed to be clear that the board preferred place, theme, or value names. While the board and Haas seemed perplexed as to why survey respondents said they preferred "place" names for schools but then later voted to keep school namesakes, none of them noted that "person" is not offered as an option on the survey question.

"Having something named after a person would be the exception, the rare exception," said Osborne, who suggested changing the policy "so that people who are on these committees don't assume that keeping the name is the default choice."

The county namesake schools still to be reviewed are Agnor-Hurt, Stone-Robinson, Baker-Butler, Walton, Burley, and Henley.