

6/13/2020

To the Awards Committee,

While I know most of you very personally, addressing the committee formally feels like it requires introductions. My name is [REDACTED] and I attended what was then called [REDACTED], from 1989 until my graduation as a member of the class of 1998. I am currently a member of the [REDACTED] faculty as an Upper School English teacher. My son, [REDACTED], is a rising third-grader and my daughter, [REDACTED], will be a member of the Primary class in the fall.

I believe that changing the language describing our traditional awards - Head Boy and Ivy Leaf - would be a mistake. The reasons for my opinion are manifold. They are both institutional and personal. While the committee will ultimately make this decision, I hope that my voice will be heard as a contribution to the discussion.

The suggestion that simply having one award for a boy and one for a girl is inherently offensive strikes me as silly<sup>1</sup>. It is language policing and fishing for divisions where none actually exists. Rather than, as one line of argument goes, affirming our mission, it would be betraying our history. When long-standing traditions come under ideological attack, it is worth re-examining the origins of those traditions. In this case, we have deep roots. The school was founded in 18[REDACTED] with what was, at the time, a very progressive agenda - the education of girls. For most of the school's history, it was exclusively a school for females. Given this history, and the Ivy Leaf's important symbolism, why would we abolish the Ivy Leaf? If we do so, are we not abandoning the significant gains of our past? I believe that we should celebrate the fact that we have a traditional award that acknowledges the achievements of the girl who best encapsulates

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<sup>1</sup> I've considered not using this particular word at the beginning of such a letter, wanting to avoid unnecessarily creating a tone of indignation, but, having deleted and reinserted it many times, I can't think of anything more accurate, expressive, or apropos.

the school's values upon her graduation. It has been one hundred years since women's suffrage became law, and places like █████ are integral to that story. Isn't it incumbent upon us to retain the traditions that uphold our role in the historical march toward radical egalitarianism?

The Head Boy Cup is likewise important. If we are taking our mission statement seriously, masculine virtues should also be a part of what we recognize in our students. The passing on of the cup provides a senior boy the opportunity to think about the values and lessons he has learned as a student at █████ Academy. Its elimination would significantly degrade the sense of autonomy we claim to be creating in our students<sup>2</sup>. Boys need recognition for their accomplishments, now more than ever. If we are truly striving to make the next generation of men better than their predecessors - in their treatment of women, in their understanding of themselves, and in their presentation to the larger world upon graduation - then canceling the Head Boy Cup seems counterintuitive. Standing up for our traditions would be not only smart but also institutionally prudent. These things are of consequence to the families who send their children to our school. Boys, whom we are tasked with molding into men, will continue to present themselves to us. How we deal with them will tell us more about ourselves than it will about them. What do we really value?

Making ourselves look exactly like the rest of society should not be our goal. Independent schools should have the freedom to be truly independent. When institutions flail in the winds of every passing trend - and there is no trendier field than education - they weaken from the inside out. Let's be truly independent and push back on the impulse to respond to every politically correct directive by flinging out the banner. By maintaining, rather than dismantling, our long-standing traditions.

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<sup>2</sup> Watching █████'s video this year provided an illustrative example. This award is not some privileged, Yale-style, legacy trophy. It is a reflection of what the faculty deeply believes. This is another instance in which our values and mission statement *are already* being reflected by our actions, and not just our words. This is what we do... - █████ is not a victim, because we gave him the strength not to be one.

I am proud of the inclusivity and special atmosphere of our school, both now and when I attended years ago. We provide a uniquely protective and loving environment that should be treasured and nurtured, for all students. I also firmly believe that the concern over our awards stems from the sincere worry that if a student worthy of recognition does not fit our traditional structure, we will have no readily available alternative. This is a legitimate possibility and something worthy of faculty consideration. However, the faculty is absolutely capable of making such a decision, should such an eventuality take place. Adjusting to new challenges does not have to mean eliminating, or re-crafting the language, of awards that already exist. Empowering the faculty should be the goal. We have always voted on these things. We are also the ones doing the loving, accepting, and educating of our students and of course, want our ultimate awards to reflect all of the work that we've done. Just like you can always add more salt to a dish but can't take it away once added, we can always create a new award but, once abolished, old ones will be hard to reinstate. Balancing our historical identity with current trends will not necessarily be easy, but I have enough faith in the people who work here to believe that we can collectively make decisions that positively celebrate all graduates. If, however, voices are silenced and legitimate debates shelved, as so often happens in bureaucracies, and new rules are simply handed down, the entire institution will suffer.

I rarely express my personal opinions, even when it comes to the place that I have chosen to make my living, bring my children to be educated, and have committed myself to supporting. In this case, however, the stakes seem especially fraught. I want my children to experience the same transformative and affirming environment that I did. I of course had both liberal teachers and conservative teachers, but I also recognize that I got an especially *classical* education at our school. I had Latin from fifth grade on, was exposed to a varied and deep curriculum, had one-on-one Greek as a senior, and entered college at 17 ready to write hermeneutical exegesis of New Testament passages - because of the distinctively individualized classical, yet modern education, I received at [REDACTED] Academy. Our school, by its very nature,


appeals to parents for these reasons. The buildings and grounds, the artwork, the chapel, the Mystery, the ceremonies - these things are draws, not detriments. In moments of upheaval, it can be tempting to rush a modernizing overhaul, designed to catch up to the times. Strong institutions display an ability to take a breath, lean back on traditions, and reexamine the transient current situation.

None of this is new, it just feels like it is. From fifth grade on, my classmates were of many races and faiths<sup>3</sup>. There were gay students and straight students. There were poor students and rich students. We navigated all of these things without antagonism because we generally recognized that this was a unique, and sheltered environment. Even if I saw through rose-colored glasses then, and continue to do so now, I still want my kids to have something approaching that for themselves. To have a school they can be proud of, that is quirky and interesting. To have friends that are diverse and challenge their assumptions. But also to attend a school that has its roots firmly grounded in traditions and history. To that end, I hope that the Ivy Leaf and Head Boy Cup are still extant when they reach the ages to be eligible for them.

Sincerely,



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<sup>3</sup> It was a different environment then, but I recall a particularly racist soccer referee telling my classmate, , that his turban was unacceptable for our game. He roughly squeezed it and claimed it was too hard. Our team met and decided that if he couldn't play, we wouldn't play. We won the argument - and moved on.