



# South Eugene High School

*Strive for Excellence*

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Gustavo Balderas  
Superintendent of Public Instruction  
Eugene School District 4J  
200 Monroe. St.  
Eugene, OR. 97401

Dr. Balderas,

On December 14, 2017 you gave me the task of collecting information from school stakeholders regarding their perceptions on our team name, The Axemen. In addition to gathering information I was tasked with providing you with a recommendation as to how we should best move forward as a school on the matter. Please find the attached document in fulfillment of that task.

The recommendation is organized into the following categories:

1. Purpose;
2. Background;
3. Recommendation;
4. Rationale;
5. Cost Implications;
6. Conclusion.

In addition to the final recommendation, you will find the requested fiscal impact study as well. I make mention to some specific points which could be considered when fully evaluating the fiscal impact of the recommendation.

Please know I stand ready to respond to any questions or provide any additional information you believe will be helpful when making your decision to support, amend or reject this recommendation.

I greatly appreciate the support that you and district leadership have provided throughout this process.

Regards,

Andy Dey, Ed. D.  
Principal  
South Eugene High School

## **Purpose**

The South Eugene High School (SEHS) community is engaged in a discussion of school tradition, inclusion and unity revolving around our team name, the Axemen. Community members have filed competing petitions to express their perspectives. One would change the name to foster a sense of inclusion for female athletes and students who do not feel that a male team name includes them. The other would maintain the name to honor the longstanding traditions of our school and our community. Other community members have views not fully expressed in either petition.

You have instructed me to recommend to you how the school should proceed in this matter. The purpose of this memorandum is to convey to you my recommendation. I begin with a summary of the historical background to this discussion and of my approach to this assignment. I then outline my recommendation, its rationale and implications for the decision.

Through this process, I have sought a resolution that will ensure all students, student athletes and teams are united under one name and one symbol moving into the school's future. I have also sought to document this decision sufficiently such that it may serve future administration well if faced with similar matters of importance within the school.

## **Background and Approach**

What is now known as South Eugene High School opened in 1897 as Eugene High School. Eugene graduated its first eight students in 1901. While the school hosted sports teams, it had no unifying team name or symbol until the E Club (lettermen's club) began in 1926 holding an axe in photographs for the yearbook. By 1936, all interscholastic sports teams, and student athletes, were referred to as The Axemen with two crossed double-bitted axes adopted as the school symbol. The name and symbol have consistently, but not exclusively, represented the school, its athletic department and student body since then.

### *Women's Sports before Title IX*

Women's sporting opportunities existed at SEHS as early as 1910 as evidenced by photos of the women's basketball team in the 1910 yearbook. Sporting opportunities for female students grew slowly over the years. Through the 1950's and 60's, SEHS had more pre-Title IX sporting opportunities for females than did many other schools around the country, but with no expectation of parity between men's and women's sports. Prior to the enactment of Title IX, women's sports were not considered to be part of the SEHS Athletic Department and instead were considered to be part of the Girl's Athletic Association (G.A.A.). According to a 1968 alum and SEHS Hall of Fame Inductee heavily involved in the G.A.A. at the time, girls were "just glad to have some equipment, a field to use and an adult who was willing to coach, although the coach was generally the one who drew the shortest straw." (Personal Interview, 2018). At this time in the

school's history, most women's sports teams were not referred to as Axemen. Instead, these teams appeared in yearbooks with nicknames like the Axegals, the female Harriers (Cross Country), the Cinderettes (Track), the Mermaids (Swimming) or simply as the Girl's Team (Volleyball, Basketball, Tennis etc.)

### *Title IX*

The enactment of Title IX in 1972 ushered in a dramatic increase in female participation in sports at SEHS and the acceptance of female teams as an official part of the school's Athletic Department. After the enactment of Title IX, the school did not refer to all female sports teams as The Axemen with references including Lady Axemen, Lady Axe, Axewomen and simply South Eugene. It is reasonable to assume the school was responding to the incongruity of referring to all-female teams as The Axemen.

In 1978, some six years after enactment of Title IX, females began training with their male teammates and were given uniforms that officially associated them with the long-established teams from South. The uniforms were the same as those worn by male team members (different than their previous uniform that simply said South Eugene) with the word AXEMEN prominently displayed on the front. The following year, the coach of the Track team was quoted in the yearbook saying, "The idea was to bring women to the level of the men to make them work and push harder." Women's sports had been accepted as a part of the Athletic Department, but it was an Athletic Department that had been organized, down to the level of the team name, for men. Women would continue to compete with the uniforms and the team name that was developed exclusively for the men who came before them.

By 1980, "several attempts had been made to change the team name at South," (*The Eugenean*, 1980). Although the name did not change, the aptness of The Axemen continued to be a matter of some debate, evidenced by references in the 1982 yearbook (pg. 7) and school sanctioned votes on The Axemen in 1988 and in 1997. While The Axemen name remained, notable changes within the school served as poignant reminders that, while loved by many, The Axemen as a name for all at South did not fully represent the growing and more diverse athletic department or the greater student body.

Artifacts all around our school serve as examples of the way in which the school has attempted to deal with the issue. Signs welcoming spectators to South's football and soccer field make no mention of The Axemen. Instead, they display the two crossed axes and refer only to South Eugene. The same is true of the track, softball and baseball fields. All record boards in the school's athletic facilities all refer to South Eugene and The Axe while making little if any mention of The Axemen. Only half of the school's athletic uniforms refer to The Axemen. The women's basketball team – The Lady Axemen – unofficially adopted a bearded man's face as their mascot on their practice gear.

In time, teams used their own names, symbols, fonts, color schemes and styles such that no name or symbol singularly represented our teams and student athletes. The Axemen has not truly served as a single team name for South for decades, yet singular

representation is the primary reason for having a team name and symbol at a school. While such minor and unofficial changes to the school's brand addressed the issue on a case-by-case basis, ultimately having multiple team names, multiple logos and multiple identities dilutes the school's identity and unity.

In 2015, an effort was made to unify all teams under a similar team name to avoid a diffused brand with no name, symbol, font, color scheme or branding materials that officially represented the school. The administration contacted an alumnus working in graphic design and marketing who agreed to help develop an updated branding package for South. The branding package specified the color schemes, font, primary and secondary logos and overall guidelines that would constitute the school's official brand. In those guidelines, it was stated that The Axemen was the school's official team name, the two crossed, double-bitted axes were the school's symbol and that the interlocking S and E could be used on athletic gear. Stated within the guidelines was that no other team name nor symbol was considered official. While the focus of the effort was to adopt a unifying team name and avoid situations in which clearly and exclusively male images were seen as representing the school, others felt as though mandating the use of Axemen for all teams, including those consisting exclusively of female athletes, was discriminatory.

### *The Conversation Today*

In October of 2017, a complaint was filed with the school administration about use of the term Axemen to represent all teams at SEHS. Frustrated by a perceived failure to act, a complaint was filed with the Office of the Superintendent seven days later claiming discrimination under Title IX due to the name as well as other perceived violations. The complainants met with the district's legal counsel, with you and with me to voice their concerns and show community support for changing the name, The Axemen. After a review of the information, you instructed me to gather information from the school community (students, faculty, parents, site council, alumni and community members) and to make a recommendation to you as to how the school should proceed.

I decided that, as this is a matter of equity and inclusion, a vote would not be an appropriate way to decide this question. Changes to our policies or practices do not need fully half of the students in the school to feel discriminated against or excluded. In 1963, Gallup found that 78 percent of white Americans would leave their neighborhoods if black people moved in, while 60 percent of them opposed the March on Washington (which featured Dr. Martin Luther King's I Have a Dream speech.) Yet the Congress passed the Civil Rights Act one year later to outlaw discrimination based on race. As such, I determined that my recommendation would not be based on the real or perceived majority opinion on this matter.

As directed, I developed a survey of community views on this matter with assistance from the district's Communications Department. Nearly 4,000 people from the greater school community responded. Key findings include the following:

- Nearly 75 percent of respondents indicate that it is important the team name represent **all students**
- Yet nearly 40 percent of respondents do not agree that "the Axemen accurately represents me"
- Also telling are trends in the responses to the statement "The Axemen Accurately Represents All Teams at South". Twenty percent of our former students, 33 percent of our current students, 52 percent of our future students, 53 percent of our parents and 56 percent of our staff did not express agreement with this statement.
- Similar, yet more pronounced, trends are seen in responses to the statement that The Axemen accurately represents **all students** at South. Twenty five percent of our former students, 37 percent of our current students, fifty eight percent of our future students, fifty six percent of our parents and 55 percent of our staff did not express agreement with this statement.

We were also presented with two petitions initiated by members of the school community; one in favor of changing the name and another in favor of keeping the name. We have received feedback through thousands of emails, letters, phone calls, op-ed pieces, letters to the editors, unofficial opinion polls from the student body and personal conversations with members of the school community as well as the community at large. All of this information, as well as findings in peer-reviewed scientific research on the impact of language and labeling, has informed my recommendation below. I will make all of the information that I received, gathered and evaluated upon request to the district office for others to review.

## **Recommendation**

I recommend that South Eugene High School adopt a branding package with the following recommendations:

**Team Name** – Axe – Uniforms can display Axe or South Eugene.

**School Symbol** - Two crossed double-bitted axes

**Colors** - Purple and White

**Logos** – Similar to currently adopted logos

- Two double-bitted axes
- Interlocking SE
- South

## **Rationale**

*Why The Axe?*

History is Important – The vast majority of respondents to the district’s surveys indicate agreement with the statement that it is important to maintain a connection to the school’s

history. The Axe is the original symbol adopted by the school in the 1920's and is the symbol that our students and student athletes have rallied around for more than 90 years. The Axe has served us well throughout its history and will serve us well moving into our future. The symbol recognizes Eugene's heritage as the Lumber Capitol of the World and maintains a connection to the school's history and traditions while allowing the school to move forward into its future.

So is Inclusion - Adopting The Axe also helps the school address, with finality, this issue of inclusion that has persisted over time and unites all students, student athletes and teams under one name and one symbol moving into the school's future.

*Why not The Axemen?*

History is important – When EHS teams were initially coined The Axemen, all interscholastic sports teams representing the school were male. The gender-specific name was thus appropriate. This is no longer the case and calls into question the appropriateness of its mandated use for all teams. Over the last four years, half of the student body and 43 percent of the student athletes were female. Women at South have fought long and hard for equity and parity in many areas. Athletics is no exception. We understand how some, who feel they have invested a great deal over the years to earn acceptance into The Axemen tradition, do not now wish to dismiss that accomplishment. That said, we embrace the premise that one symbol and team name should properly represent, at once, all teams collectively and at the same time each team individually. As such, the symbol and team name must not be gender specific.

All Students Matter at SEHS - Students have come forward to say that the current team name does not represent them. This feeling is not limited to this year alone. This has been a topic of discussion, debate, one-off solutions and now division within the school community for far too long. I have heard from parents, student athletes and coaches each year questioning why our student athletes are referred to in a gender specific way. This is a trend that persisted to some degree for at least the last 38 years. If nearly 75 percent of our community feel it is important that a team name represent all students while at the same time nearly 40 percent of the same community indicates that The Axemen does not do so, the name must change.

Moving Forward - This concern has been raised on multiple occasions since at least 1980. It has presented a specific challenge for our student body in general, and our athletic department in particular. Teams competing in sports at South that are categorized by OSAA as women's sports have gone by many names as a result of a prevailing sentiment that The Axemen misses the mark of an accurately representative team name for an all-female team. Thus we have had women's team names Axemen, Lady Axe, Axewoman and simply South. Changing the name to The Axe resolves these issues and provides a symbol that consistently and accurately represents all teams at South.

## Cost Implications

This decision will not be immediately embraced by all members of the student body or the community writ large. Most prevalent among the reasons stated for not changing the name are tradition and cost. I would like to address those here. Some have suggested a name change will erase or impugn history. I do not believe that claim has merit. South is and forever will be proud of its history and traditions. This is precisely why I am recommending the school move forward as one being represented by The Axe. History and tradition are not being abandoned and in fact are being reaffirmed and galvanized in this next phase of the school's history. The argument that changing the name is offensive to the school's history is as baseless as the counter argument that not changing reveals institutional sexism and misogyny. South students seem to have long known this to be true. The 1978 yearbook has the following quotes on pages 4, 7 and 9 respectively:

- “It is not literally true that history repeats itself, except that it teaches us that what was true yesterday may not be true tomorrow.”
- “The history of the human race is a history of change. The real student of history realizes that at any one point he may be wrong.”
- A knowledge of history is the enemy of snap judgement and rigidity in thinking.”

The team name **can** change while at the same time preserving and protecting the essence and relevance of the school. Success will depend on the degree to which the community comes together and rallies around the school.

As for costs, the uninformed estimates that have been offered are inaccurate. Nearly all costs associated with unification of all teams under one team name will be the same whether the name changes or stays the same. No matter the team name, the school will continue to purchase new uniforms on a cycle established several years ago. Thus, we save little by maintaining the Axemen. Similarly, we will always replenish letterhead, envelopes, diploma cardstock, spirit wear, etc. Again, little is saved no matter what decision is made. The costs associated with making a change are small compared to estimates made by those in favor of staying the same. The one-time cost associated with an updated team name is a small price to pay to ensure all teams are unified under one officially branded symbol. To put matters into perspective, the one-time cost associated with a change will represent less than half of what the school spends on transportation to sporting events in this year alone. A full fiscal impact statement has been completed and is submitted as an addendum to the Office of the Superintendent.

The school and district leadership will need to examine the fiscal impact statement, reconcile this with other school district priorities and determine the pace of renewal. At the very least the school should make efforts to prioritize purchasing new uniforms to replace those that have the name Axemen. As we are running low on letterhead and envelopes, I would also recommend an immediate change on those items listed as “Non-Athletic” in the fiscal impact statement.

## **Conclusion**

I submit this recommendation fully aware that it will not satisfy everyone, but with the hope that all members of our community will recognize that it expresses our shared values of tradition, inclusion and unity. South will remain the home of The Axe. Our boys and girls teams will step onto the field or court carrying with them more than a century of tradition, expressed in a way that will unify them as a single school community. And yet we are adapting that tradition to a new, more inclusive world in which women compete just as aggressively and skillfully as men.

I have been humbled and honored to watch thousands of members of our community engage in this discussion - through our community forum, submitted letters and comments, our school survey, petitions and other means – with respect and an abiding commitment to our common shared values. Alumni from as far back as the class of 1953 as well as alumni in Hawaii, Germany, Italy and Japan have written to contribute to this conversation. It is an honor to work in a school with such an invested community.

Now we have other fish to fry. We are beginning to develop our Curriculum Guide and Master Schedule for this next September. We will soon be renovating the women's lockers rooms which are in dire need of updating. We have an upcoming re-accreditation visit from AdvancED and more than 360 seniors preparing to graduate in June. I look forward to continuing our community's work together, with your support, to build South into one of the finest high schools in the Pacific Northwest – preparing our kids for extraordinary lives rooted in our shared values.