

Smiths Falls teacher offers advice on Arnprior Redmen name change

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Last week's announcement that Arnprior District High School (ADHS) will do away with its Redmen nickname has sown deep divisions among alumni and students alike.

There was talk of a rally forming to keep the name at a recent school basketball game. It never came about. Online is a different matter, though. Hundreds of posts to various Facebook pages on the topic range from heartfelt and passionate to bitter and rude. The majority are against the name change.

A Smiths Falls high school went through a similar experience about a decade ago. Social media didn't play as large a role, but other factors may prove instructional to stakeholders in Arnprior.

"In the end, it's a name." Bill Wheeler

Bill Wheeler was at the heart of the dispute back in 2005. He remains a teacher in the athletics department at Smiths Falls District Collegiate Institute. They, too, were called Redmen. But with the move to a newly built school, the school board saw an opportunity to move away from a name many indigenous and non-indigenous people say is racist. They are now called the RedHawks.

"A lot of the alumni were a little bit surprised, me included," Wheeler said. "I'd say the most important thing is to keep everybody in the loop and part of the process."

ADHS principal Tom Havey announced the change at a school assembly, called media organizations, and sent messages home to parents. The school will also vote on a new name later this school year.

Wheeler said he was busy with all the chores of moving to a new location, along with pricing new uniforms. So he didn't pay much attention to the protests.

"I was pretty neutral about it. In the end, it's a name," he said. "I was so busy I didn't have time for anything else."

There was an element of inevitability, he indicated, saying many decisions these days are made at the board level, including name changes. But when a course of action is taken, he suggests make the most of it.

"There is going to be people with negative feelings about some decisions. You've got to take the lots of positives that come with it," Wheeler said. "I hope the (ADHS) alumni don't see it as a slap in the face. Things change, and we have to focus on the high school and what is best for the students. That's what matters most."

He said current RedHawks students are unaffected by the controversy, and even students at the time got over it quickly.

He laughed, saying one problem was solved immediately.

"We used to play Arnprior when both were named Redmen. It's a lot easier now," Wheeler said.

A Calgary high school changed its name from Redmen to Redhawks in 2014. A Charlottetown, P.E.I. school changed from Redmen to Raiders in the early 1990s.