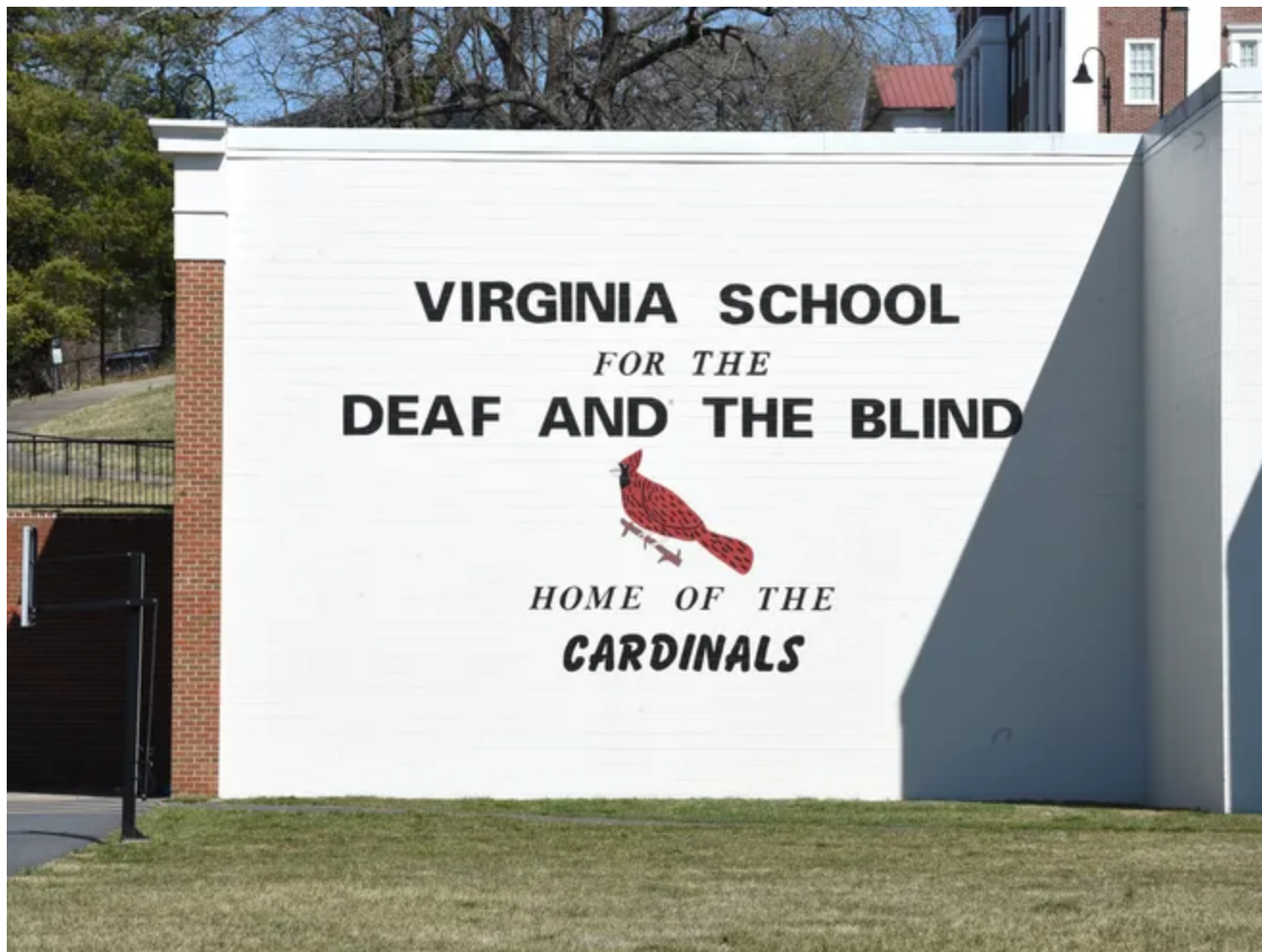


Superintendent, new mascot still a source of friction for many VSDB alumni



STAUNTON — A battle is still raging between some alumni of the Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind that started with news of a new mascot for the school that, ironically, was meant as a symbol of unity.

Now, some of those graduates want the superintendent fired, while others say Pat Trice is just the leader the school needs.

In a process that began before the start of last school year, VSDB announced this past June that it has selected a unified mascot, a Defender. The new fox-like creature replaced the two mascots that the school had been using — Cardinals for the deaf department and Chiefs for the blind department. The school for deaf students has been known as the Cardinals since 1967, while the school for the blind has been using Chiefs as its mascot since 1959.

"The unified VSDB effort and moving forward with a shared mascot was an operational decision made

in the best interest of the current students," Trice told The News Leader. "All of the current students."

The move was made to help unify a campus that, for many years, felt separated. Until 2013 there was a school for the blind and one for the deaf. Nancy Armstrong, superintendent at that time, relocated the two schools into two shared buildings, creating one school with two departments. Trice said that was the catalyst for making VSDB "a more inclusive, equitable, and unified educational setting."

Not everyone is happy though. Some deaf alumni launched a petition to keep the Cardinals mascot in March. That one has 1,581 signatures as of Monday. Then they launched a petition in early June to fire Trice. That one has 440 signatures. Then in late June alumni who questioned Trice's leadership [protested in downtown Staunton](#). Another demonstration is planned in Richmond Thursday as the VSDB Board of Visitors (BOV) holds its quarterly meeting. The Virginia School for the Deaf Alumni Association has funded a chartered bus to Richmond for those who want to protest.

"Of course I can hope nothing because the BOV will ignore us," said Dave Tester, an alumni who plans to be in Richmond. "But we need to do steps to document everything so we could get rid of Trice."



Virginia State Senator John Bell is the president of the Board of Visitors.

"The board has full faith in Pat's leadership," Bell said. "She's received the highest ratings on her

evaluations for years. Pat is a great asset for the school."

Bell said that any discussion about Trice's tenure at VSDB is not on the agenda for Thursday's meeting, but it can be brought up by board members or during public comment.

"Honestly, I've read some of the things from the petition and there's not a single specific instance of non-performance," Bell said. "It's generic. It's broad. There's really nothing for us to even consider."

The Virginia Association for the Deaf board of directors was one of several groups or individuals to send letters to the Board of Visitors in opposition to Trice. Some of those letters were shared with The News Leader.

"In her role as Superintendent of VSDB, she has manipulated almost everything to fit what she wants rather than the needs of students, faculty and staff at VSDB," the VAD letter stated. "The VSDB Superintendent Patricia Trice also demoralizes everyone at VSDB."

Janice Dillman, a retired teacher, wrote to the Board of Visitors questioning the decline in VSDB's enrollment and the cancellation of Gallaudet-Clerc Day in honor of Laurent Clerc and Thomas Gallaudet, founders of the American School for the Deaf, blaming Trice for both. The News Leader did reach out to Trice for comment on those two issues but hasn't received a response yet.

Bell said the decline is simply a factor of public schools providing more services to both blind and deaf students than they did in the past.

"And they provide them at a good level," Bell said. "So some parents make a decision, perhaps, not to send their children (to VSDB)."

According to the 2022 annual executive summary, VSDB serves approximately 60 students from across Virginia with enrollment increasing in the years since COVID shut down schools around the state.

Not all oppose Trice





Just as there are alumni opposed to Trice, there are some graduates of VSDB and their families in support of the superintendent.

Raquel Monroe was a student at Charlottesville High School in 2017 when she developed hydrocephalus, damaging her optic nerves and causing her to lose most of her vision. She transferred to VSDB in 2018.

Monroe's mom, Lucy Alston, was at a loss navigating not only the health care system but the education system with a blind child. She had never heard of VSDB despite living less than an hour from the school. It was a nurse at Charlottesville High School that told her about the Staunton school. Both mom and daughter said that while not every experience at VSDB was perfect, overall they felt the school met Monroe's needs and the teachers were very supportive.

"I don't have anything bad to say about the teachers," Alston said. "And I don't have anything bad to say about Mrs. Trice. Nothing at all. The entire time Raquel was there we talked about whatever we had concerns about and everything was always taken care of."

Mom and daughter are both excited about the unified mascot, saying that there was a divide between blind and deaf students at the school that extended beyond just the classroom. Monroe felt that there was favoritism shown toward the deaf department and hopes that the unified mascot means the school is headed in the right direction.

While she was a student, Monroe, who is an artist, won a contest by putting both the Cardinal and Chief on a banner to show unity. Her hope was that one day a mascot would be created to show the importance of both blind and deaf students on campus.

"I was really happy," Monroe said about the selection of the Defender as VSDB's new mascot.

Warren McKeen is the chair of the VSDB Foundation board. He has known Trice since 2014 and has been impressed with her energy in working to raise the profile of the school.

"It's been a thrilling time since I've been involved," McKeen said, "We've seen a lot of great gains. We have the gardens, the farm at the school. We just introduced blind soccer. We've got the independent living apartments. There have been a lot of things that have happened under Pat's leadership and her tenure that didn't exist prior. I find that all very exciting. It's a move toward a more positive, inclusive

school environment."

New Mascot

**VSDB is proud to announce its
new Unified Mascot...**



THE VSDB DEFENDER

While some deaf alumni question Trice's leadership, it appears that it was the new mascot that was the tipping point leading to the current dissatisfaction with the superintendent.

Trice said it was more than just her involved with changing to a unified mascot. The first move toward a shared mascot was in 2013 under former principal Jack Johnson but it took 10 years to become reality. When making the decision Trice said she reached out to various stakeholders, including both alumni presidents — Michelle VanBoxlaere of the Deaf Alumni Association; and Carolyn Bowling of the Blind Alumni Association.

"Both were very supportive of the move toward a shared mascot and both arranged follow up meetings for me with their boards," Trice said. "I met with each president with their boards and again gained support. Not one person expressed any concerns regarding moving forward with the shared mascot concept."

VanBoxlaere said that she was contacted by both Trice and Bowling in July 2022 about the mascot, and invited the superintendent to a board meeting for the deaf alumni. But while she was open to the

process originally, she said Trice changed the timeline and didn't communicate to her board.

"Pat made sole decisions about the change of the mascot and color selection process," VanBoxlaere said. "The VSDB alumni and I don't support the new change done by Pat without discussing and seeking approval from the stakeholders and the VSDB Unified Mascot advisory group."

In March, VanBoxlaere's alumni association sent a letter to the Board of Visitors and to Trice.

"We ask that you not diminish the values that we carry with the Cardinal but help us preserve our legacy," the letter said in part. "We ask that you reject the intention to remove the mascot. The Cardinal reminds us that we can fly, and will."

Bowling is the president of the Blind Alumni Association. Unlike VanBoxlaere, she was pleased with the process VSDB took to find a unified mascot.

"We were not happy giving up our Chief," she said. "I'll say that. We were really unhappy with that. But it was a necessity to be politically correct. We said, as long as you preserve our history we are happy with this."

Bowling said school officials have already contacted her association about how best to preserve that history and she's provided feedback.

"We've always had a good relationship with Pat," Bowling said. "She would come to our meetings, call, email, text, letting us know what was going on."

The new mascot may unify the current students but it hasn't, at least for now, brought the school's alumni together. Whether it will eventually only time will tell. Whether the Board of Visitors addresses the situation will be answered Thursday.

For now, Trice said she can't worry too much about the negative things being said about her. She wants to keep her focus on the students.

"They are the reason that VSDB exists," Trice said. "And their best interest is and will remain the focus and driving force behind any decisions made at VSDB."

— *Patrick Hite is a reporter at The News Leader. Story ideas and tips always welcome. Contact Patrick (he/him/his) at phite@newsleader.com and follow him on Twitter [@Patrick_Hite](https://twitter.com/Patrick_Hite). Subscribe to us at [newsleader.com](https://www.newsleader.com).*