

Courtney S. Wang - '74

My position on changing the name

## **Governor Dummer Academy**

- Introduction
- 5 Point Position
- Conclusion

October 10, 2005

## **Courtney Wang's position on changing the name of Governor Dummer Academy.**

### **Introduction**

After having allowed ten months of time to mull over and consider the announced name change the trustees of **Governor Dummer Academy** want to make, I have come to a conclusion about my position regarding the idea.

First, I would acknowledge that I have no official standing in the matter. I voice my thoughts only as a concerned alumnus, a long time benefactor, and former trustee of the school. I understand the need to improve the school and make progress.

I am responding to a question posed to me by a current member of the Board of Trustees and my classmate, Steve Shapiro '74. He advised me of the decision to change the name shortly after they voted to approve the measure in December 2004. His question was, "So what do you think of a name change now that the board has voted to change it?"

In taking time to consider my thoughts, I wanted to avoid a knee jerk reaction in favor of a thoughtful process with an eye toward the school's best interest and whether or not this idea improves the school.

### **My Position**

I think it is unwise to change the name, **Governor Dummer Academy**. I see little if any meaningful benefit in either the short term or the long term in exchange for all of the up front and consequential costs required to effect such a change, including lost revenues from donations of disenfranchised constituents. It is not in the best interest of the school.

Specifically:

- 1) I do not see any significant (20% or more) or meaningful (recurring) increase in applications by prospective students interested in attending the school resulting from a name change. (This is a rather low bar to set by the way.)**

Although the Trustees think a significant increase in applications will result, I do not believe it will. Based on a survey the Trustees commissioned, it is a leap to infer that a nominally defined public's opinion of a nice name will translate into more applications to the school on a sustained basis. The majority of 12 to 14 year old children are not interested in attending private schools for many reasons, none of which has any thing to do with the name of a school. Opining on a name will not evoke an interest to attend private school let alone this school. As for the narrow slice of 12 to 14 year olds who are in the market for private school education, the process by which his/her family must undertake to search for the qualities of a school compatible for that child to attend will render useless any hoped for, if any, advantage a prettier name might imply.

It is suggested that the school will gain significantly more prospective candidates from outside the Boston area because a nicer sounding name will reflect better on

## Courtney Wang's position on changing the name of Governor Dummer Academy.

the school's qualities. The truth is; there is no credible evidence to support the claim, "The name **Governor Dummer Academy** systemically and substantially causes qualified candidates and their families to disregard the school". There is no statistical preponderance presented to conclude a cause and effect here. The survey did not address this relationship. The argument for a name change is based on anecdotal information at best and emotionally driven suspicions stemming from insecurities about the name that help to assuage disappointment, and the fact that **Governor Dummer Academy** does not enjoy preeminent status. It is this point that I believe has a direct bearing on the interest and demand of the school vis-à-vis those schools that enjoy a better reputation with which it must compete. It is flawed logic to think changing the name is going to enhance the reputation of **Governor Dummer Academy**. A name, and a reputation are different concepts.

Does that mean the school has never suffered disinterest because of its name? After 242 continuous years in operation, probability and statistics says most likely yes, it has. Having said that, its name has no more of a negative impact than any other exceptional reason. For example, there will always be a segment of the market that will think the name Saint Paul's School is just too religious sounding for them. It is the exception not the rule. It is a natural aberration. (By the way, that concern has not prevented Saint Paul's from becoming a preeminent school with one of the largest endowments of all private secondary schools in the United States.) The same holds true for the name **Governor Dummer Academy**. With so many years in existence, instances in the past in which a family has passed on considering the school due to its name must be assumed. However, the incidence of this happening is not any greater than the natural aberrant statistical phenomenon that happens to all schools regardless of their moniker. It is not going to change with a different name. The excuse will change and that is all.

Since it is cited as justification for a name change by the president of the trustees, the idea that the school will expand on national recruiting is disconcerting. In the realm of secondary school education where the student body is made up of "minor" children, the effectiveness of recruiting beyond a day's drive (6 hours) has always been rather tenuous. Knowing from first hand experience living here in Dallas, Texas, my 13 year old daughter's mother made it very clear to me, in no uncertain terms, that she would never allow our daughter to live away from home while she was still in her adolescent formative years. Her position was gender and institution independent. She advised me it wouldn't have mattered if our daughter was a son and the proposed school was Exeter. This is the prevailing sentiment even though I have first hand knowledge of the school as well as a "spare no expense for education" philosophy. Now, if it is true that the national trend is shifting away from the traditional secondary school boarding experience as we know it, especially for students whose homes are greater than a day's drive away, and if it is true the general demographics of U.S. school age population continues to shrink, as stated in the Report on the Proposed Name Change, then it would be extremely unwise to try and force preserving that boarding school experience by expanding on national recruiting. It is simply ill advised. That is

## Courtney Wang's position on changing the name of Governor Dummer Academy.

not to say one cannot try to minimize the effects of a changing world. It just needs to be done in a constructive way that has an excellent chance of success. Changing the name is neither constructive nor likely to succeed in creating greater demand for the school.

Expanding on and targeting a national pool of qualified prospects is itself a complex endeavor. As one who has helped interview candidates for Tufts University over the years, my observation is this. Local alumni associations must be organized and engaged, there must be a recruiting support system in place that is well funded. It requires discipline, management structure and oversight. There must exist relationships with a network of feeder schools with intimate knowledge of the recruiting school and programs to keep their interest in recommending the school to their students. Then, this effort must be replicated in all of the largest cities in America. Of course, the reputation of the school must be outstanding in at least certain fields of expertise and publicly acknowledged as such on a national basis. National universities with large budgets have difficulty making this work. The best that **Governor Dummer Academy** can do, given its resources and current standing in the independent school world, is to continue "cherry picking" the national pool of candidates it currently targets using the methods with which it has had success. The school is not prepared financially or organizationally to embark on a national recruiting strategy of the kind that will bear significant results as desired in the recent Report on the Proposed Name Change.

It has been further suggested that due to technology advances from PC's to the Internet, the process by which qualified potential applicants and their families select schools to consider, or short-listing, has shifted away from the parents and to the child, that he/she discounts **Governor Dummer Academy** because of its name. The essence of this argument calls for the "blind" to lead the "enlightened" or the "ignorant" to lead the "wise". While technology may have accelerated the flow of information to the masses, it is illogical to conclude that the basic paradigm has changed. First, families interested and willing to make the extra financial investment to prepare their child for college are engaged in their child's life and are involved. They will not relinquish control of the process including short-listing. Second, at \$37,000 - \$40,000 total cost per year and possibly \$150,000 or more for four years, no parent is going to allow their young teenager to control a process that results in the disbursement of such significant financial resources. Put another way, if you were going to part with \$37,000 to \$150,000 of your money, would you trust your young teenager to tell you where to spend it? No is the only answer. Thus, while parents will involve their kids in the process, as they should, it is the parents who will be in charge of the effort. The thoughtful steps taken by qualified prospective families searching for the right environment for their child's academic best interest will not diminish due to technology.

I am afraid to say that I have heard from an avid promoter of the name change idea, who shall go nameless, that parents now leave the whole process including

## **Courtney Wang's position on changing the name of Governor Dummer Academy.**

the final decision up to the child. -- Please. Let's be real! -- I guess the only thing left is for the child to sign his/her parent's annual check for \$38,000.

### **2) I do not see an increase in prospective students choosing this school over the competition simply because the name is cosmetically nicer.**

In fact, the 2003 survey conducted by SE Surveys Inc. makes a disclaimer that supports this point. "A few questions were asked about what matters in selecting a school to understand which name might better reflect those criteria. **It is important to remember the survey could not attempt to ascertain whether one name vs. another would be any more likely to insure the family would be interested in attending the school - as stated, that decision is too complex and has more to do with academics, facilities, faculty etc.**" Essentially, the survey impeaches the importance of the school's name as a factor in choosing a school for attendance. Thus, there is no credibility in changing the name for the purpose of competitive consideration by prospective students and their families. No increase in demand for the school can be expected.

Note: It was remarkable to see the glaringly absent line item of "School Name" as one of the selection characteristics in the survey when it asked respondents to rate the importance of specific characteristics in the school selection process. The conclusion; it wasn't on the survey because there is no meaningful importance to it in the selection process.

### **3) Changing the name of the school isn't going to make it a better school.**

Herein lies the crux of the matter as I see it. Changing the name will not make the Science program at **Governor Dummer Academy** the best Science program of all private secondary schools in the country. Nor will it make the English and math departments so outstanding that the school becomes renowned for having the most innovative and effective learning environment for secondary school students. Changing the name won't even improve these programs incrementally. The reputation of the school will not revalue higher. Creating the best programs and curricula in any category at any school, and subsequently gaining the reputation for it is a matter of substantive work and investments. You cannot name your way to a more successful school. Yet, this is precisely what the name change proposal is attempting to suggest. In the end, people choose to buy into a product, service, school, etc. based on what they view as the best feature-function-benefit, or value, for their particular set of circumstances.

Case in point: Years ago, in 1951, when Dr. An Wang started Wang Laboratories Inc., he was given advice not to include the name Wang in the moniker. His bankers and advisors counseled him professionally against it and his personal friends implored him not to do it. The reasoning from everybody came down to one pragmatic view that, at the time, American society was biased against Asians. And the name Wang as you know was and currently still is an Asian rooted name.

## **Courtney Wang's position on changing the name of Governor Dummer Academy.**

Antipathy toward anybody related to that part of the world back then was common. Most people didn't even care about the distinction between China, Japan, and the many other Asian countries. They were simply lumped together, and on cursory view prejudged. Everybody who advised him felt that he would severely limit if not outright preclude any possibility for success.

So why did he choose not to listen to them? I asked him years ago in my twenty's. His response was illuminating. In paraphrasing him, I remember it as follows. He said, "People know value when they see it. They seek it out. It's in their interest and nature to do so. It's fundamental and it's universal. If you have an ability to create real value that people desire or need, you're in demand. If you can do it well, people will remember you and your reputation will grow. Your name follows what you do." He went on to tell me that he had always had confidence in his ability to create value and help others. He told me he was proud of his name, that it told the world where he came from efficiently in one word, and that it was up to him to build the goodwill in the name.

In short, my life experiences belie the logic being used to justify changing the name of **Governor Dummer Academy**. Enhanced value, increased demand for the school and more success will not follow a name change. They will only follow when the deeds by those who run the school make it a better school. The Trustees would be well advised to spend more time creating and building "best of breed" qualities in the school instead of trying to make it appear as something it isn't. I cannot see any benefit to be had with this proposed name change.

### **4) The total cost of execution is unknown. Thus, there is the real possibility this action could weaken the school's financial condition.**

There will be many costs exacted in the process. Those costs will be real and there will be many. Some will be measurable and manageable. There will be the practical costs associated with a name change, those should be manageable, but not without some risks due to unforeseen events and just plain errors in judgment. The significant cost will come from lost operating income caused by reduced annual donations due to disenfranchised alumni and friends, as well as lost estate-planning gifts from parting alumni and friends who feel the same way. This income stream is particularly hard to lose since there is no trade tied to it. Except for Development Office costs, which might take a few cents per dollar donated, virtually all of it is available for day-to-day operations. The question becomes, how much of this annual gift giving and estate-planning income will disappear? And how will it affect the operations of the school?

Let's try to make an educated guess. It is fair to say that not all 100% of each year's potential gift giving will go away. Unfortunately, the school will not experience zero loss of gift income either. Since many donors have formally agreed to donate a certain amount each year for a number of years, and since some donors are just in the habit of giving something each year, it can be

## Courtney Wang's position on changing the name of Governor Dummer Academy.

estimated that 50% of what the school would normally receive each year going forward is probably safe from disappearing, at least initially. Let's say that an all out sales promotion of the name change idea is able to influence those who are on the fence, as is currently happening. An additional 10% can be protected from disappearing. That leaves up to 40% of annual alumni and friends gift giving is at risk of loss. Since no study has been done to more accurately predict the loss of gift giving, let's just make a fair guess and split the difference in half. So we get 20% loss of annual gift giving could be the consequence of a name change. Can the school operate with this loss of income each year going forward? And what if the loss of this gift income were greater, say 30% or 35%?

If we use the financial expense limit rule the Board of Trustees follow and apply it to the lost gift income, i.e. treat it as an annual expense since it essentially acts like an expense, we can estimate its impact on the endowment. For every \$35,000 in lost annual gift income there needs to be 1 million dollars of endowment to cover that loss. If the school loses \$70,000 each year, there needs to be 2 million dollars of endowment to cover the loss each year. And, if the school loses \$350,000 in total annual gift giving, 10 million dollars will be needed from the endowment to cover the lost operating income each year. According to the Report on the Proposed Name Change, **Governor Dummer Academy** only has \$68.6 million in endowment value at present time. Discounting the efficiency of this vital financing tool by even a few million dollars is not in the school's best interest. If the school is forced to set aside portions of the endowment to cover the annual lost gift income, the effect is equivalent to shrinking the endowment.

Goodwill associated with the **Governor Dummer** name will be primarily tied to the alumni constituency although parents and friends of the school are invested in the name too. The value of goodwill or the loss of goodwill is hard to measure but is very real. It correlates to sentimental value as defined uniquely by each and every constituent. Sentimental value is directly translated into monetary value. It comes in the form of gifts and other benefits at all levels every year. In addition, the lost potential opportunity from the younger constituents, those in the 25 most recent graduating classes, may never be fully known as they are still creating and building their asset base. Alienating that group will have long-term fundraising effects that will last a generation. The relationship with every benefactor must be taken seriously and must be taken into account. The impact of lost goodwill will only be felt after the fact. And once it is gone, it is difficult to get back, if ever.

- 5) **It is morally wrong to deny the founding benefactor the supreme level of honor and recognition to which so many people owe so much of their personal growth and achievement. Taking it away from him is an act of betrayal.**

Honor, loyalty and trust are virtues of sound character. The school would be morally bankrupt in its effort to build character in its students if it were to change the name without the **Dummer** moniker. Changing the name in any way that

## Courtney Wang's position on changing the name of Governor Dummer Academy.

diminishes the honor and recognition of **William Dummer** would de-legitimize the school's moral authority to provide such guidance. Moral integrity is inseparable from the very nature of its objective to teach it. The Trustees are as much obligated to protect the viability of the school as they are entrusted to protect **Mr. Dummer's** wish to establish and build a school in his name. That he served remarkably in Colonial America but was childless underscores the morality that he should keep a legacy by which the world will remember him.

The undisputed facts are these:

- **William Dummer** is the founding benefactor.
- He served as Lieutenant Governor and as Acting Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.
- He donated all his worldly assets to the establishment of this school.
- His name has been on the moniker since its inception.
- He had no children of his own.
- The school has been utilizing his assets beneficially since 1763.
- The school was established prior to the establishment of the United States of America.
- **Governor Dummer Academy** is the oldest continuously run private secondary boarding school in the United States of America.
- Tens of thousands of students have passed through the halls of **Governor Dummer Academy** during its entire history.
- The vast majority of its constituents have a sentimental attachment to the current name regardless of their position on a name change.
- Hundreds of masters have built their professional careers and enjoyed life at **Governor Dummer Academy**.
- The value of **William Dummer's** generosity is priceless.

### Conclusion

I am of the opinion that the only result a name change will achieve is a name change. All of the good intentions to help the school will go for naught. In the process, it will do irreparable harm to the goodwill accumulated by the school over the years and destabilize the foundation that is paramount to any successful not for profit organization, goodwill, moral integrity, trust and financial stability. It is a divisive idea that is not needed. The school will not improve with a name change.

The opportunity **Governor Dummer Academy** faces at this time in its history is to invest in and build on its academic and extracurricular infrastructure in a way that would bring it to preeminence. Success at achieving this goal will create a permanent increase in demand for the school from all quarters of the world. It will also draw unanimous support from all stakeholders affiliated with the school. Advancing the school in this manner is constructive; the constituent base will open up their pocketbooks and a name change becomes irrelevant. **Governor Dummer Academy** can become a preeminent school.