

# Namesake Advisory Committee:

## *Report to the USD 345 Board of Education and the Community*

SUBMITTED ON OCTOBER 11, 2021



Additional documents and resources from the Namesake Committee can be found on the district webpage.

[https://www.seamanschools.org/board\\_of\\_education/district\\_namesake\\_process](https://www.seamanschools.org/board_of_education/district_namesake_process)

# Executive Summary

**What was once rumor in Seaman schools was verified last year by Kansas newspaper articles from the 1920s: District namesake Fred Seaman was not just a member of the Topeka Ku Klux Klan chapter but its leader, its “exalted cyclops.”**

As the clippings indicate, Seaman’s leadership role in the white supremacist group was well known. So, too, was his role in bringing nine primary school districts together to create a rural high school, extending education to rural children beyond the eighth grade. By many accounts, he was liked and respected, enough so students insisted the district bear his name.

Now, of course, the district, the USD 345 Board of Education and its residents are debating whether that name should remain or be changed. The intensity of those feelings prompted the school board to create a Namesake Advisory Committee of district residents, alumni, staff and a student to engage the community in the process of determining what to do about the namesake issue.

Our committee’s charge, on the recommendation of the Kansas Leadership Center, involved a collaborative process. The idea is that if you bring people together in a productive way with good information, you get results that more people in the community can live with. Members of our committee were chosen because they represented different perspectives on the namesake issue, and we conclude this process and this report without a recommendation on what the name should be nor a sense that it’s our role to be making one.

But we did have shared experiences, including leadership training from KLC. We divided up our work to be able to provide a comprehensive report to the community on the namesake issue. One subcommittee examined the history of Fred Seaman and his roles in the district and KKK. Another held

community conversations that gathered stories participants thought might be relevant to the namesake issue. A third subcommittee formulated and conducted, with the leadership center’s assistance, an online survey of district residents and others that reached several thousand respondents.

This survey revealed not just strong differences of opinion about the namesake issue, but also competing values that the district must weigh. Among those taking the survey, 45% favored keeping the Seaman name, while 16.4% wanted to remove it. Nearly 40% either did not respond to a “keep it/change it” question or did not care either way.

“Participants’ comments show that proponents and opponents of the school’s name change may hold different sets of values,” a survey report says. Those who favor the name change are concerned about inclusion, justice, diversity and anti-racism. Those who favor keeping the name are concerned with history, tradition and their own experiences with the school, and are concerned about the possible monetary consequences of change. For one group, the name is a point of pride; the other a point of shame.



# Executive Summary

**Despite varying views on the committee, at least three findings are shared by our members. That includes:**

- *We are persuaded that the historical record confirms Seaman assumed a role as a senior leader in the Topeka Ku Klux Klan and that no record has surfaced of his saying otherwise. The record also shows that Seaman was respected in the community for his educational efforts and pivotal in the creation of the district and the community that exists there today.*
- *A significant portion of stakeholders in the community are loyal to the Seaman district name, in part because of their very positive associations and experiences with the district that they view as their community.*
- *Discussion about the namesake issue has revealed that racism, bullying and other forms of intolerance negatively shapes the experiences some students have with the district need to be considered regardless of what the district is named.*

**To resolve this issue, we suggest that the school board and the community prioritize discussion of a handful of key questions, including:**

- *What does the history of the KKK and Fred Seaman's association with the district and the KKK mean, and how will the district and the community choose to reckon with it?*
- *How can tradition and the positive experience most patrons have with the district be best honored?*
- *What are the district and its patrons willing to give up in relation to this issue?*
- *How might the district begin to more fully address the issue of racism and bullying that negatively affect the educational experiences of some students?*

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This report summarizes the extensive input we received and the history involved, with the intention of helping the Board of Education make a well-informed decision. The final decision is in the school board's hands.

# A bit of context

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Opinions are strong, a fact known since a Seaman Clipper article in October 2020 revealed Seaman's KKK role. The time since has revealed the depth of those viewpoints, speeches and letters to the school board, vigorous statements on social media, and campaigning outside of school buildings. A "keep the name" petition has circulated locally, while another seeking to remove the name was presented to the school board last fall and can still be signed online.

The namesake issue and debate have drawn local to national media coverage and are occurring amid national debates over systemic racism, police shootings and the Black Lives Matter movement, the removal of Confederate statues and flags, and many other polarizing issues. One of many challenging factors is that, for many residents, Seaman is not just a school district but the name of their community and part of their identity. So, it's the community's name at risk, not just a mascot like Indians or Redskins. That raises the heat north of Topeka.

Words and phrases often heard to explain one's stance on the Seaman issue include tradition, diversity, community, history, racism, future and inclusion. The cost of changing signs and buses and many other things was cited by many, although a number has not officially been put on the cost of such a change. Charges of perpetuating racism and erasing history were made. Some people are concerned about what keeping the name says to district children, and to those who might move to the district. Some debate whether there could be an economic impact on the community, or whether teachers will leave or be harder to attract. Others respond: Don't like it? Then move.

Together the answers raise the question of whether one can still be proud of the community and school district – "Seaman Strong" – if the name changes. Or if it stays the same.

This is not the first time Kansans have wrangled over the Ku Klux Klan. In the 1920s, the Klan was at the height of its national popularity, having up to 4 million members. "Klan tickets" listed favored candidates for state and local offices, as the KKK sought to influence government and public education. Fred Seaman endorsed and ran on such a ticket in Topeka, and several times sought the state's top education post himself.

Some Americans saw the Klan as an organization trying to uphold the Protestant American way of life, opponents called out the Klan for secretiveness, vigilantism, and the hate it espoused against Blacks, Jews, Catholics, immigrants and others. Some American Legion posts and Rotary Clubs denounced it. Republican Gov. Henry Allen worked to legally shut it down and called it a "curse." William Allen White, nationally known editor of the Emporia Gazette, ran for governor in opposition to the Klan, calling them "masked fanatics." The Klan faded with the 1920s and its popularity has ebbed and flowed since. Today, it has largely been supplanted by other white supremacist groups.

Much has changed in the Seaman district since its founding. Today, the district and the nation are more diverse and less rural. Now, nearly 10% of USD 345's 3,800 students are Hispanic, three times the percentage of three decades ago. Under 3% are Black, while about 1% are Native American or Asian. Illustrating the nation's evolving makeup, about 5% of students identify as multiethnic. Nearly 3,100 of district students are white – about 80%, compared with the 93% of 30 years ago.

During the committee's information-gathering, instances were recounted multiple times of students,

past and present, being bullied or hearing the N-word or homophobic and other hateful comments. This seems to be an issue that, as some observed, is “about more than a name.” It is also an issue that crosses paths with what many respondents across the spectrum say they value educating students and preparing them for the future. In other words, focus on the kids when deciding.

As the Board of Education and district residents and supporters consider the issue and what the community said, we ask them to consider how it fits alongside the district’s mission:

*“Prepare each student for lifelong success through strong and healthy relationships, rigorous and relevant learning, and a responsive and caring culture that maximizes student talents, aspirations, and community contributions.”*

## The committee and its work

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Our Namesake Advisory Committee consists of nine alumni, many with generations of graduates in their families. Some have children in the district right now, while others are parents or grandparents of graduates. The oldest graduated in 1975; the youngest will graduate in June.

All volunteered or answered the call when the district organized the Advisory Committee, agreeing to participate in the process of gathering the community’s thoughts on the Seaman name.

“I’m a Viking” is a common refrain among us committee members. Many share a concern that others in the community expressed – that the debate has divided the community and they would like to see the district heal and come together again. As with many district residents, “tradition,” “family,” “history” and “community” are words heard from committee members. So, too, is the desire that the needs – educational and otherwise – of district students be at the center in the discussion.

Soon after the advisory committee was appointed, the Wichita-based Kansas Leadership Center was retained to advise the committee and school board. A coach and other center staff helped our committee develop a plan to solicit input and prepare this report to the school board. Committee members attended multiple workshops and other meetings to devise and revise our approach.



At the first workshop, we discussed what we thought were the different stakeholders in the debate and the best ways we might gain their input and move the discussion forward in the community. At the second, we shared what we had heard so far from the surveys and conversations and what steps we should take next. At the final one, we discussed what themes we heard and how we could share what we learned with the school board and community through this report. A writer was hired through KLC to interview committee members and help us prepare our report.

Some committee members focused on specific areas and tasks. One subcommittee examined the history of Fred Seaman and his roles in the district and KKK. Another held in-person Red Couch Community Conversations that gathered stories participants thought might be relevant to the namesake issue.

Seeking broader input, a third subcommittee formulated and conducted, with the leadership center's assistance, the online survey of district residents and others. Most took the survey electronically, but when some said they lacked the technology to take it, a paper version was created that they could submit. The survey and Red Couch sessions were announced on the district's website and via the district and Seaman Alumni Association Facebook pages. More than 3,550 people took the survey, a sizable number for a district of about 20,000 residents.

Near the end of this report, we have included things the school board could consider no matter what it decides, along with some factors it could also weigh depending on whether the Seaman name remains or is changed. They are based on what we heard during conversations and from surveys.

## NAMESAKE ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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### Amy Calhoun

CLASS OF 2004  
HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER

### Eric Curls

CLASS OF 1985  
RETIRED FIREFIGHTER

### Corey Dehn

CLASS OF 1995  
ARCHITECT, PRESIDENT OF SEAMAN  
EDUCATION ADVANTAGE FOUNDATION

### Yvonne Etzel

CLASS OF 2001  
MARKETING PROFESSIONAL,  
DISTRICT SITE COUNCIL

### Paula Frey

CLASS OF 1988  
MANHATTAN SMALL BUSINESS OWNER,  
PRESIDENT OF SEAMAN ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

### Stephanie Konrade

CLASS OF 1983  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER

### Curt Lewis

CLASS OF 1975  
BUSINESS OWNER

### Olivia Oliva

CLASS OF 2022  
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

### Michelle Cuevas Stubblefield

CLASS OF 1984  
COMMUNITY STRATEGIST

# History

The creation of the Seaman school district and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in Kansas and across the nation occurred virtually simultaneously during the 1920s. Both arrived during a time of great national change, and both featured Fred Seaman, USD 345's founder.

World War I had raised the intensity of patriotism. The nation was becoming more industrialized and less rural. Black Americans were migrating in increasing numbers from the South, while Hispanics were settling in the Midwest, often for railroad work. Decades of immigration had brought Italians and others – many Catholic or Jewish – from southern, central, and eastern Europe to our shores. The speakeasies of the Roaring '20s butted up against Prohibition, the attempt to make America dry.

## TIMELINE

### RED: FRED A. SEAMAN HISTORY

#### — **Appr. 1900-1917:**

F. Seaman in Wabaunsee County

#### — **1915:**

Release of Birth of a Nation movie (began Americanization of communities)

#### — **1916:**

Fred A. Seaman, and family move to Topeka, KS

#### — **1917:**

Plans to unify Northern Shawnee County into one school district

#### — **1918:**

Fred Seaman is the East Indianola grade school principal / World War I interrupts his plan to unify the district

#### — **1919:**

\$85,000 bond for school (no personal \$ by Fred Seaman)

#### — **1920:**

60,000 Klan members in Kansas, belonging to 30 local Klan organizations

#### — **1920:**

Starts Seaman schools (Students voted to name school after Seaman) Consolidated 9 districts form the rural school district

### BLACK: KKK IN KANSAS HISTORY

#### — **1921:**

Klan first organized in Topeka and 8 other cities (Georgia branch of KKK) Tulsa Massacre

#### — **1922:**

Diary of Seaman school girl documenting a minstrel show (30 students wore black face, made "Negro" jokes and danced "Negro" dances)

#### — **1922:**

Ran as Republican candidate for State Superintendent of Public Instruction (Sought office multiple times including 1930 and 1934...)

#### — **1923:**

3 miles North of Topeka, 1,000 men "gathered in the glare of a flaming cross... for a Ku Klux Klan initiation." (As Exalted Cyclops of the KKK Fred A. Seaman would have been there.)

#### — **1923:**

"Nearly 1,200 people joined the Klan's 1923 march in Topeka, according to a Topeka Daily Capital article from July 22 headlined: "The KKK Owned Topeka Last Night."

#### — **1924:**

100,000 Klan members in Kansas

### BLUE: SEAMAN SCHOOL HISTORY

#### — **1925:**

State charter Commission ruled against the Klan and the Kansas Legislature outlawed its activity in Kansas

#### — **1927:**

The Seaman Bank was founded, the first high school bank in the United States

#### — **1931:**

Fred Seaman leaves Seaman school district, becomes Principal of Onaga High school

#### — **1933:**

Viking chosen as official mascot

#### — **Appr. 1934:**

Fred Seaman leaves Onaga and goes to Arkansas

#### — **1954:**

Seaman High School moves to 1124 NW Lyman Rd (now Logan Elementary school)

#### — **1970:**

Seaman High School moves to 4850 NW Rochester Rd (current location)



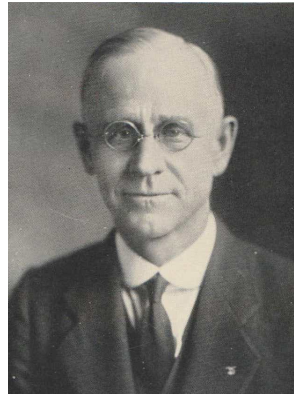
Many feared the nation's morals were going down the tubes, and the revived KKK, which had largely faded with the 19th century, had a pitch that resonated with some: "100 percent Americanism."

"The Klan advocated the restoration of 'true Americanism' and offered members a platform that demonized blacks, Catholics, Jews, Mexicans, Asians, and any other nonwhite ethnic immigrants," a University of Alabama historian wrote in *The Atlantic* in 2016. The Klan presented itself both as a moral, Christian organization and a fraternal one and sought to "hold back the tides of modernity and ensure that forces scheming to undermine the authority of native-born white Americans would be kept at bay," he wrote.

"Typical members were ... middle-class white American men and their families: small-business owners and salesmen, ministers and professors, clerks and farmers, doctors and lawyers," the historian wrote. Many were also Masons, as was Fred Seaman.

By 1920, the KKK had established itself in Kansas. That same year, Seaman Rural High School came into existence, being the vision of Seaman, who had taught in Wabaunsee County before moving to Topeka in 1916 and becoming principal of East Indianola grade school in 1918. The new high school incorporated nine grade-school districts, some with names familiar today, Indianola, Lyman and Rochester among them.

Seaman was well liked in the district and was principal for about a decade. "In the course of his labors in the community he had won a secure place in the hearts of the people," according to a 1928 article in *Kansas Teacher* magazine. The article noted that students themselves had insisted the school be named Seaman. It also described schooling with vocational and agricultural focuses. Although many students would likely work on the farm after completing their educations, the school provided training in accounting and other office skills, as well as college prep.



**Fred Seaman**

A 1929 *Topeka Capital* article, headlined "Seaman School a Real Monument to Its Founder," said the principal "always was a close student of rural school problems, always sympathetic with every movement for bettering opportunity to give the country boy and girl better educational advantages."

The high school "has become a social and recreational center," the *Kansas Teacher* story said, and "contributed to one larger and common end. This is the building of the Seaman community. Before the Seaman High School was built ... the people were prone to be kept apart by petty jealousies, mistrust, and antipathy. They grouped largely along racial and family lines. Theirs was a community with the unity left out."

Seaman had ambitions beyond being a principal: Several times, the Republican sought to become Kansas' superintendent of public instruction, but he was never chosen. Articles and advertisements list his accomplishments and civic activities: Education from Washburn, KU and K-State; church trustee; Rotary Club and the YMCA, including prominent roles in youth programs; a member of the state textbook commission and Shawnee County Farm Bureau.

An activity the articles and ads don't mention is Seaman's KKK membership. He was, in fact, the exalted cyclops, top leader of Topeka's Klan.

The Klan, with its hoods and nickname of the Invisible Empire, is by its nature a secretive organization. Still, with an estimated 4 million members in peak years of the 1920s – and an estimated 60,000 in Kansas – it was not so invisible. Newspapers covered its meetings, although members' names were kept out of the cover



# THE STORY OF SEAMAN

Frank M. Chase, Illinois

(Reprinted by special permission from March issue of "Hour's Dairymen.")

THIS is the story of Seaman. It is the story of a teacher, of the school that he built, and of the community which they, together, transformed. I have written this story a half dozen times and discarded each draft. In my previous attempts I failed because, I think, I tried to emphasize the teacher, the school, or the community. The story is not of one of these, but of all of them. I also tried to draw conclusions, to point out lessons. That is unnecessary for the things which have been done in this community speak for themselves. So I shall set down, as simply and as truthfully as I can, the facts about this teacher, this school, and this community, and leave you to draw your own conclusions.

It all began about ten years ago, when Fred A. Seaman became principal of a district school along the outskirts of North Topeka, Kansas. The school was just an ordinary four-room school, in an ordinary rural district. But Seaman was, and still is, no ordinary teacher, and to him this school spelled opportunity.

About him the boys and girls were leaving school at the end of the eighth grade, some because they could not go to the city schools and others because they could not obtain the kind of schooling they should have. This should not be, Seaman thought, and he himself being able to teach several high school subjects, added two years of secondary work to the elementary instruction under him.

The patrons liked this move, and Seaman felt encouraged to go on. For a while he entertained the idea of consolidating the schools of four districts. A rural high school seemed to offer a greater measure of community service, however, and presently he was at work to make this a reality.

During most of his thirty-five years of teaching experience, Seaman has farmed as well as taught; and at that time he was living on, and operating, a farm of several hundred acres within the area which would be taxed to build the proposed high school. The fact that he was asking no farmer to shoulder a tax burden which he himself was unwilling to carry added force to his argument. Other conditions were favorable and, in due time, in 1915, bonds for an \$88,000 school plant were voted.

While the building was under construction, the year following, Seaman, believing that his work in the community was over, accepted a position in the office of the state superintendent of schools. When it came time to select a principal for the new school, however, the choice fell upon Seaman, and he was brought to take the place.

He hesitated. As a state official his ideas on rural education were having a wide scope. On the other hand, he knew the power of example. However, as a teacher and farmer, Seaman had dreamed ever since beyond of the kind of a rural school he would have if he could build it. And here was his chance to do so.

Not without reason was Seaman recalled to direct the high school which he had built. In the course of his labors in the community he had won a secure place in the hearts of the people, and they sincerely wanted him back. The depth

of their affection for him perhaps is best indicated by the fact that the school now bears his name.

It happened this way. Seaman had been principal but a short time when, one day, the board asked if he would not get up a list of possible names for the school. This he did and, through the pupils, submitted them to the patron whose wishes were to be voted by the pupils.

At the assembly called for this purpose the names were again presented and a discussion of them invited. The youngsters didn't have much to say for a moment, but finally the principal was asked if he would not leave the room. In a few minutes he was called back.

"Mr. Seaman," said the pupils' spokesman, "it is our unanimous wish, as well as that of our parents, that the school be called the Seaman High School."

The slender, gray-haired man at the front of the room almost broke down. It was a struggle to keep the tears back. Feeling himself together, however, he protested with all his might. But it was no use. The pupils knew what they and their fathers and mothers wanted, and nothing the principal could do would change their minds.

Far from giving Seaman an exaggerated idea of his own importance, this evidence of faith in him only increased his desire to serve the community. He has given his best to it, and in doing so has turned, perhaps, a bit of new ground in rural education.

Within the forty-eight sections comprising the high school district were grain farmers, stockmen, potato growers, truck gardeners, dairymen, big farmers, and little farmers. The district included city as well as rural residents with the high school students dividing about equally between town and country. To meet the educational needs of a population so diverse was indeed a problem. Nevertheless it has been met.

From my acquaintance with the people," Mr. Seaman explained, "I knew that few of their children would go to college. On the other hand, most of them would end their schooling in the community in which they began it. The purpose of Seaman High School, therefore, as I saw it, was to prepare them for citizenship in the work-day world about them.

"For this reason vocational work has a rather large place in our curriculum, and we try to make this instruction as practical as possible. As a part of it, the boys carry out actual production and marketing projects on their fathers' or other farms. Often these projects yield financial as well as educational profits. One boy, for example, made \$400 in a year on cantaloupes. Another made a profit of \$400 on a registered cow, while through failure to clip and market his potatoes at the right time another boy lost \$200.

"We also give laboratory instruction in agriculture. To accommodate the demand for this and shop practice a special building had to be erected. In the shop work practical things, not knickknacks, are made. Dozens of the boy tractors, milk trucks, wagon packs, and wagon boxes now in use on Shawnee County farms are the work of our



Fred A. Seaman  
Principal, Seaman Rural High School

## APRIL 1925

*The Topeka State Journal, in coverage repeated across the state, reports on the first "Klan ticket" in city elections. "The tiny two inch by four inch slips bear across the face the endorsement of Fred A. Seaman, exalted cyclops of the Klan organization. Seaman is principal of Seaman rural high school, north of the city." Later, the article refers to "Seaman and his robed brothers."*

## JANUARY 1926

*The Kansas City Star observed "Seaman a Klan Problem" in coverage of a Topeka Klan meeting. Attendees discussed whether Seaman, "well known as a klansman," should seek the Republican nomination for state superintendent of public instruction, while saying the Klan's strategy was to "soft-pedal" its role, because going public turned races into an anti-Klan fight.*

age. One reporter was taken blindfolded to an initiation ceremony, conducted in "the glare of a flaming cross three miles north of Topeka"; an estimated 1,000 men attended the 1923 event. With the city limits of the time, the ceremony would not have been far from what was then the high school and is now district headquarters. Seaman's KKK role was clearly spelled out in some articles, while others provide clues:

## LATE 1923

*A story about an Emporia Klan gathering notes "The Exalted Cyclops of Topeka Klan No. 78, addressed the assembly on the important subject of 'Our Public School System.'"*

## JANUARY 1925

*A letter to the editor appearing in the McLouth Times from the exalted cyclops of Topeka notes that it "comes from one of the outstanding men of character in Topeka – an educator, a progressive citizen, a law-abiding man backing up law enforcement to the limit."*

It's not possible to know what was in Seaman's heart and head when the Klan is concerned, as no diaries or meeting minutes or public Klan declarations have been found. But from Klan publications, it is possible to know what a KKK leader like Seaman was expected to believe and do. A KKK manual of the 1920s, "The Klan in Action," states: "The officers of the local Klans, the Exalted Cyclops and Terrors and committee chairmen, are the 'line officers' and fighting leadership of the Army of the Klan. ... It is they who are in contact with the enemy." Nearly every local unit committee – Civic, Propaganda, Governmental, and Public Schools among them – is appointed by the exalted cyclops.

"The Klan in Action" says "the Public Schools are the foundation of our national success and spirit, and the sources of patriotism and Americanism. Therefore they are the particular objects of attack and propaganda by our enemies. Constant vigilance is required to assure that they are performing their functions well and that they are not perverted." Seaman, as principal

or possibly state education superintendent, could have exercised such “vigilance.”

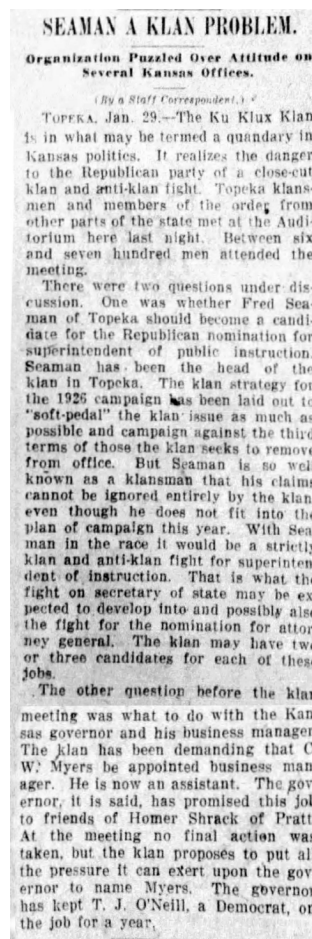
The Ku Klux Klan’s initial reputation for violence was deserved, with night riding and intimidation and lynching of Black Americans. The 1920s incarnation disliked Jews, Catholics, and immigrants as well.

“America for Americans,” a 1920s Klan pamphlet, claims a devotion to Protestant Christianity and praises Pilgrims, George Washington, and both Abraham Lincoln and Robert E. Lee. “The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan desire that this blood not be polluted, but kept pure. ... America has become more and more a melting pot, and her native born in many sections are being pushed in the background by a flood of foreigners. ... The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan do not feel that it was for the refuse populations of other lands that the Pilgrim Fathers worked and suffered.”

The Ku Klux Creed in that pamphlet spells out a core belief: “We avow the distinction between the races of mankind as same has been decreed by the Creator, and shall ever be true in the faithful maintenance of White Supremacy.”

In Kansas, the movement played out in various ways. When the Hutchinson school board refused to fire all its Catholic teachers – the Klan believed Catholics more beholden to the Pope than to the U.S – the local Klan tried to oust them from office. The Catholic mayor of Liberty in southeast Kansas was kidnapped and flogged after refusing to rent the Klan a hall. Crosses were burned in many places.

It’s possible many members were more attracted by its message of patriotism, God, and a return to the good old days than by the Klan’s hate. Other Kansans, though, were repulsed.



The KKK’s hate and the division it created were one reason. Others were its secrecy – if one was doing good, why wear a mask, they asked – and its tendency to take the law into its own hands. Some were put off by its attempts at policing morals, as the Klan supported temperance and members were known to patrol lovers’ lanes for necking couples.

Two prominent critics were Henry J. Allen, governor from 1919 to 1923, and Emporia newspaper editor William Allen White, both Republicans.

Allen moved against the Klan in the early 1920s, driven in 1922 by the attack on the Catholic mayor of Liberty. “Kansas has never tolerated the idea that any group may take the law into its own hands and she is not going to tolerate it now,” he said in a speech. Allen and the state would use the law and the weight of government against the Klan, declaring it lacked the charter to legally operate in Kansas.

They have introduced in Kansas the greatest curse that can come to any civilized people,” Allen said, “the curse that arises out of the unrestrained passions of men governed by religious and racial hatred.”



**William Allen White**

“I want to be governor to free Kansas from the disgrace of the Ku Klux Klan... I am proud of my state,” White wrote, saying he was driven to run by “the thought that Kansas should have a government beholden to this hooded gang of masked fanatics, ignorant and tyrannical in their ruthless oppression.” The Klan was “a menace to peace and decent neighborly living.”

Two years later, William Allen White made an independent run for governor when both parties’ nominees refused to denounce the KKK. White didn’t win but believed he made an impression by shining a light on the KKK.

The Klan’s influence faded with the Twenties, though it rose again after World War II. For Klansmen like Fred Seaman – as years of rumors in the district indicate – their roles were not forgotten. In 1934, near the end of Seaman’s time in Kansas, one writer revisited his role in a Marysville newspaper story about a national Klan leader’s re-election:

“The same news story did not disclose just what official position they gave to Fred Seaman, the Republican candidate for State Superintendent of Public Instruction for Kansas. Fred was supposed to be Grand Dragon, Imperial Wizbang or some other grand flunkie of the shirt tail rangers of Kansas, when they were riding the waves ten years ago. Isn’t that a fine recommendation for a man who aspires to the office of State Superintendent and who is in charge of the schools of the state for the education of our youth?”

# Surveys and other input

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We realized gathering a range of perspectives on the namesake issue required creating multiple ways for district residents, students, staff and others to weigh in. The Red Couch community conversations and the online survey were among the methods we used.

District residents also had the chance to speak directly to the school board during several meetings since fall 2020. Residents also wrote letters to the school board, and committee members examined those.

The information and findings from the Community Survey and Red Couch conversations are summarized below, with a sampling of the many remarks including in the “What Was Heard” section.

## RED COUCH CONVERSATIONS

The Red Couch sessions – red lawn chairs, actually – allowed district residents and others in the community to share their views in person at various locations: NOTO, Every Plaza in downtown Topeka, The Pad restaurant, and Performance Tire. The intention was to find places people might be gathering or doing business and, with the COVID-19 pandemic, were all outdoors.

Basic questions asked about a person’s ties to the district and their gender and race. The question about race generated strong responses, including, “What difference does that make concerning this issue?”

Questions spurring more extensive answers asked:

- *Based on your district experience, can you share a story relevant to the namesake discussion?*
- *What must be done regardless of what decision the board makes?*

Over 30 people shared their stories via the Red Couch. Feeling that more views needed to be collected, we adapted and an online form was created and 53 more people weighed in. Overall, about half the respondents were former students, and slightly under half were current district residents.

## COMMUNITY SURVEY

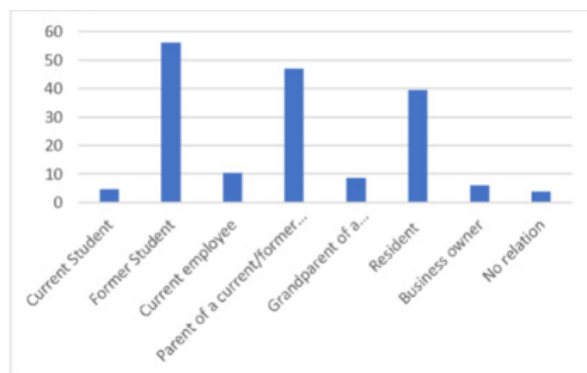
The survey – largely conducted online but also allowing participants to submit a paper version – had a tremendous response: 3,557 people took it over six weeks during the summer.

Nearly all of those taking the survey, 96%, had a past or present close connection to the district, as alumni, parents, employees, district business owners or current students, with many belonging to more than one group.





Types of Relationships (%)

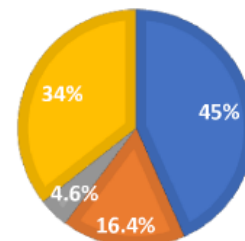


### Positive and negative experiences with district:

Over half of participants are former students, and nearly half are parents of a current or former student. More than 9 in 10 – 92% – reported having a positive experience with the district. Parents and alumni were a bit more likely than current students (86% positive) to report a good experience with the schools. Those who mentioned a positive experience tend to think the district values inclusion and diversity; has quality teachers, curriculum and activities; and is a safe space for kids. Those who said their experience was negative – about 8% overall and 14% among current students – mentioned racism, bullying and a tendency to favor better-off families. They told of homophobia, sexism, and sexual harassment.

USD 345 should...

■ Keep the name ■ Change the name  
■ No Preference ■ No response



### Keep the Seaman name/Change the name:

Overall, 45% of the 3,557 respondents would like the Seaman name to stay, while 16.4% would like the Seaman name removed. Support for keeping the name was highest among parents, at 53% vs. 12% to change, and alumni, 48% vs. 17%. Among current students, 37% want to keep the name, and 15% wanted to remove it. It's worth noting that 34% did not answer the Keep It/Change It question, while 4.6% said they didn't care one way or another. That sizable percentage is open to interpretations: One is that many thought they'd already made their views clear. Another is that for a significant percentage, they might not like the decision – whether to change it or keep it – but would live with it. Yet another is that participants might not have thought they yet had enough information.

The chart below shows some general takeaways from the responses.

PROPONENTS OF NAME CHANGE	OPPONENTS OF NAME CHANGE
<p><i>What does the Seaman namesake issue mean to you?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inclusion &amp; antiracism</li> <li>Justice</li> <li>Diversity</li> </ul>	<p><i>What does the Seaman namesake issue mean to you?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>History</li> <li>Tradition</li> <li>Monetary consequences</li> </ul>
<p><i>What values would you most like to see guide the decision on the district's name?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning from the past to change the future</li> <li>Racism &amp; division</li> <li>Hate</li> <li>Embarrassment</li> <li>New look to future                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Positive visibility</li> <li>More enrollments</li> <li>Feel safe and supported</li> <li>Empowered and proud of the district</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><i>What values would you most like to see guide the decision on the district's name?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>My history of life &amp; identity</li> <li>City &amp; community legacy</li> <li>Reputation, success &amp; pride</li> <li>Respect history</li> <li>Concern of cost &amp; tax increase</li> <li>Feeling proud of district</li> <li>Waste of time &amp; money</li> <li>Dividing community</li> <li>Sense of community &amp; belonging</li> </ul>

# What was heard

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When those taking the Community Survey and participating in Red Couch conversations were asked for their thoughts and opinions, few hesitated to share them. Here are comments drawn from the survey and community conversations, chosen in an attempt to represent ones shared with regularity.

*"It just makes zero sense from a financial perspective to change the name."*

*"The financial argument is not relevant, because that's basically putting a dollar sign on our integrity."*

*"The financial expense of changing the name is money that could be put towards education and programs that would actually benefit the students."*

*"Our students deserve better, they deserve to attend a district not named after an educator who was a leader in the Ku Klux Klan."*

*"Quit trying to erase history"*

*"We can't erase the past but we can atone for it and make our district stronger and more inclusive."*

*"Just because white people had black friends, doesn't mean those black friends had a non-racist experience at the school. Just because a black student was voted class president or homecoming king doesn't mean that racism is cured!"*

*"I'm embarrassed to say that I went to Seaman High School in any professional setting, with the assumption being that it is semen."*

*"The name must be changed if the district wishes to keep a shred of its promise to be a welcoming environment for all students, staff, and families."*

*"Soldier High School sounds good."*

*"I heard white students using racial slurs on an extremely regular basis. Nothing was ever done to reprimand them or even try to address it."*

*"Keeping the name of a Klansman sends a message that the district doesn't care enough to do better when we know better."*

*"My students have heard fellow students speaking out in hate and violence towards people different than themselves. Specifically people of color, immigrants, and people under the LGBTQ umbrella."*

*"The decision should be based on what is best for current and future students and not students of the past."*

*"The patrons in the district should be allowed to vote on it."*

*"We were known as the 'racist' school. It's not something that is fun to be associated with." Though I am white, it still affected me."*

*"While I did have a good high school experience, I do not believe I was ready for the diverse society outside of North Topeka."*

*"Please don't fall victim to the trends of oppressing majorities."*

*"Changing the name isn't going to fix racial issues. It's not the name, it's a heart issue."*

*"The board should focus on the real problems within the school, such as the rampant bullying that parents have been told 'there's nothing we can do about it.'"*

*"Look at the expense. Look at traditions. ... (Seaman held views a lot of us don't agree with now. However he also started an institution that has provided quality education."*

*"Always been a great district. Concerned with what is going on and the division."*

*"If it bothers someone then they have every right to move or enroll at a different school district."*

*"It is just a name and has nothing to do with the caring community we have."*

# Things to consider

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We encourage the Board of Education – and the community as a whole – to examine this report and to read as much as possible of what people had to say. Because the surveys and Red Couch sessions sought candor and brought the expectation of some privacy, a full list of participants' comments are not being released but will be available to the board.

As members of the Namesake Advisory Committee, we gained a great deal from hearing different perspectives from fellow district residents and alumni and from fellow committee members.

We heard about tradition and pride and loyalty and a sense of community – from both sides of the debate. We heard deeply felt stories of students who had been called racist, sexist, homophobic or other hurtful terms. We heard concerns about the financial costs of change and, conversely, suggestions that this is a case where money should matter less, because it's about who we are and the children the district educates. Many of us gained a deeper understanding of this contentious matter, not necessarily one that upended our personal stances but one which was more nuanced and often left us more empathetic about the experiences others had. Some committee members were particularly affected by the powerful stories students and alumni had of bad experiences, and how those recollections brought the desire to listen deeper and value experiences that were different than ours.

We hope the board can help the community have better conversations like we did, face-to-face ones that go beyond the ones heard on Facebook or from the people we associate with regularly. We think that could help us be a better version of the close-knit community we value.

Many tough issues have the potential of being solved or resolved in multiple ways. We talked extensively about whether there was another clear option beyond “keep it” or “change it.” We struggled to find a third or fourth way forward that would be acceptable. Instead, we concluded that the community would best be served by providing a list of possible responses for the school board and residents to consider.

## **NO MATTER WHAT THE BOARD OF EDUCATION DECIDES ...**

- *Better prepare our district's students for the increasingly diverse world they will encounter.*
- *Bullying came up again and again as a problem that often goes unaddressed. Exactly what this preparation and approach would look like is beyond the scope of the committee, but the district should find ways to make it a priority.*
- *One side of this issue is going to feel like or be deemed “the loser.” Ways must be found to include whoever doesn't get what they want if we are to remain healthy as a community. Part of this is recognizing that one person's experience – good or bad – does not negate or ignore another person's experience.*
- *Celebrate who we are as a community, and who we want to be. The 100th anniversary celebration that the pandemic delayed is a possible avenue for us to do that.*
- *Hold a series of face-to-face community conversations that bring together those with varying views. Many of us on the committee benefited from talking across the table with those holding different viewpoints and having had or heard of different experiences. We also found that, despite our different views, we shared many values – community, tradition and a commitment to the future and success of district students among them.*
- *Acknowledge that, for many, this has been a hard discussion and a difficult time.*

### IF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION VOTES TO KEEP THE SEAMAN NAME ...

- *Consider ways to “divorce” Fred Seaman’s Ku Klux Klan role from the district.*
- *Clearly define and live out the values of the district and how what is taught and modeled today is different than at other points in our history.*
- *Engage the community in discussions about diversity, while celebrating the fact that others’ experiences may be different than ours.*
- *Understand that the issue is unlikely to go away.*

### NAMES SUGGESTED

#### **Keep the “S” from Seaman:**

*But change it to Soldier School District,  
after the local township.*

*Make it Seamen like a sailor instead.*

*Make the Seaman refer to another 19th century,  
female educator instead of Fred.*

**Topeka North**

**North Topeka**

**Shawnee North, not Topeka North**

**Shawnee County North**

### IF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION VOTES TO REMOVE THE SEAMAN NAME ...

- *Acknowledge Fred Seaman and his history, positive and negative, but celebrate who we are today.*
- *Engage the entire community in the process of coming up with a new district name.*
- *As a community, work to define what we value.*

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We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this process, and we know that these suggestions and this report leave much for the community and the school board to consider in the months ahead. We ask board members and community members as well to weigh how either decision will affect others in the community. We also encourage everyone to focus on what the decision made will mean and say to those the district serves: its students.

*Respectfully yours and ... Go Vikings!*

**Amy Calhoun, Class of 2004**

**Eric Curls, Class of 1985**

**Corey Dehn, Class of 1995**

**Yvonne Etzel, Class of 2001**

**Paula Frey, Class of 1988**

**Stephanie Konrade, Class of 1983**

**Curt Lewis, Class of 1975**

**Olivia Oliva, Class of 2022**

**Michelle Cuevas Stubblefield, Class of 1984**