

Naming schools for people a fading trend

BY DIETTE COURRÉGE AND MINDY B. HAGEN
The Post and Courier

Portraits of two women hang in the lobby of Murray-LaSaine Elementary School, but some would pass by unaware of their significance.

That changed last year after the James Island school proclaimed Oct. 16 as Murray-LaSaine Day in honor of the women whose legacy is carried on in the school's name. Older students attended an assembly to learn about the school's history, and family members of Mary Alice LaSaine and Emily Albertha Johnston Murray came to the school.

LaSaine was the former supervisor of schools for black students in Charleston County, and Murray was a county teacher and principal of the elementary

Please see **SCHOOLS**, Page 6B

Eponymous schools a fading trend

SCHOOLS From Page 1B

school for black students that later became Murray-LaSaine.

"The history is so deep here," principal Lara Lotto said.

Dozens of Lowcountry schools previously were named for historical and local community leaders, but that no longer seems to be the trend. School districts are shying away from naming schools for people, instead opting for monikers with less potential for controversy.

Consider the names for two of the three new schools in suburban Dorchester District 2: Eagle Nest and River Oaks. The names refer to the natural features near school grounds.

But board members also reverted to tradition by naming the third school for former district superintendent and current school board member Bill Reeves.

School officials should strive to name buildings after noteworthy people who illustrate the core set of values embraced by the community, said Jay P. Greene, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research and head of the University of Arkansas' department of education reform.

Greene wrote a recent report examining school names in seven states and discovered an overall shift toward giving schools "nature" names.

In Florida, 44 percent of schools built before 1958 were named after people, but only 26 percent of schools built in the last decade were named for people. Nature names spiked, with 37 percent of Florida schools built in the last decade paying homage to animals, trees, flowers and water.

"Local communities have to decide what's important to them," Greene said. "Some names are chosen for their general, appealing sound. But we should use these naming opportunities to try to convince our children what we think is important — person, place or nature — and we at least need to think about what we want to communicate to them."

Greene said there's nothing wrong with naming a school after the local municipality or town

it's in, such as West Ashley High or Hanahan Middle. But naming a school after a neighborhood or subdivision built by a developer isn't the same, he said.

"That only represents a marketing opportunity," he said.

In Charleston, more than one-third of the district's 80 schools are named in honor of someone, mostly local residents. Schools once were named for living people, but that hasn't happened much in the past 30 years because a board policy prohibits it. The board prefers school buildings to be named for geographic areas.

The board passed its current policy after a former member lobbied for a school to be named after himself. School board Chairwoman Nancy Cook said the policy prevents the district from facing embarrassment, for instance, if a school honoree were to get into a political or controversial situation.

Board Vice Chairman Hillery Douglas agreed, saying it avoids the school naming process becoming a political situation, in which board members lobby one another for votes.

One exception to the district's policy was the naming of James B. Edwards Elementary in Mount Pleasant in 1981. Principal Tom Lee, who has served as head of the school since it opened, said the local board wanted the school to bear the name of a Mount Pleasant dignitary, Edwards, the state's former governor and U.S. Secretary of Energy, was their choice.

Edwards has stayed active at the school and regularly attends school ceremonies and programs.

Berkeley County is home to the smallest percentage of schools named after people. Only three of the district's 37 schools are named for local educators or school founders. Only one of the five schools in Dorchester District 4 is named after a former educator.

But Dorchester District 2 applies its school naming policy more liberally, with six out of 20 schools named after community members, mainly educators, who contributed the school district.

Charlie Stoudenmire was principal of Spann Elementary for more than 20 years. The school is named in honor of James A. Spann, a former superintendent who served from 1912 to 1947. As he roamed the halls, Stoudenmire noticed Spann's old portrait hanging on the wall and appreciated the chance to reflect on Spann's tenure.

"He had to be just a stalwart of this community to have helped the school district through the Great Depression," said Stoudenmire, now a school board member. "He served for such a long period of time and remains an example for the community. I don't know why schools wouldn't want to cherish the values of someone like that."

Reach **Diette Courrégé** at dcourrage@postandcourier.com or 937-5546; Reach **Mindy B. Hagen** at 937-5433 or mhagen@postandcourier.com.