

Henrico County high school represents the world on one campus

The most [diverse](#) public high school in the Commonwealth of Virginia, John Randolph Tucker High School, offers an environment to experience unity through diversity.

“Going to Tucker was an experience I wouldn’t give up for the world. It is a school of misfits that somehow fit with one another,” said Emina Hodžić, an alumnus from the Class of 2019. “Yet, despite our differences, we were always able to come together to be Tucker Tigers and represent our school with pride, no matter what anyone had to say about Tucker.”

The school is nestled in the heart of [Henrico](#), a county wrapped around Richmond, Virginia. Rural land and skilled tradesmen make up the [East End](#) of Henrico, served by only two public high schools. Contrarily, large suburbs attracting highly educated new money families comprise the West End. Here there are four state of the art public high schools, each with engaged and affluent parent groups. However, a unique blend of neighborhoods merge to form a unique community in the northern sliver of the county. This is the home of a very special school.

[John Randolph Tucker High School](#), or Tucker as it is more commonly called in the area, opened in 1962. The school’s front entrance looks toward Parham Road while its back door opens to modest neighborhoods shaded by towering Oak trees older than the school itself. On crisp fall afternoons, the cross-country team runs the back-neighborhood roads and occasionally stops mid-run at the local Chick-Fil-A, a hotspot for after school studying.

One of the most unique aspects of the school is its [campus](#). Tucker sits on a hill with practice fields at the top and the cramped student parking lot at the bottom. Its halls, however,

are outdoors. While outdoor [campus-style](#) high schools may not seem all that special in warm places like California and Florida, in a place that sees all four seasons, it is.

“Tucker High School is the best secret in Henrico County. It is a campus-style school on 44 beautiful acres,” said Melanie Phipps, former Tucker vice-principal and current Quioccasin Middle School principal. “We are proud of our diversity, as 65 countries and over 20 different home languages are represented at Tucker.”

If walking around the hallways during a class change isn’t enough to show Tucker’s diversity, a [pie chart](#) certainly is. The largest section, as in most US schools, is White. However, unlike the 76.5% White census report, Tucker’s section is 31.9%. The next two large populations comprising the circle are Black with 24.3% and Hispanic with 22.8%. In a country with a total Black and Hispanic [population](#) making up only 13.4% and 18.3% respectively, this is out of the ordinary for one school. The final three triangles at Tucker are, in order, 15.2% Asian, 5.0% Multiple Races, and 0.7% American Indian.

“One of the aspects that attracts people to Tucker is the cultural diversity. A lot of schools see themselves as diverse, but we are truly diverse,” said Arthur Raymond, current Tucker principal. “Students, parents and teachers find that this school prepares you for a world that contains all kinds of different cultures and languages.”

There are numerous examples of students from all different backgrounds, beliefs, home countries, languages and interests being friends at the school: an immigrant from Burma is friends with an Indian boy, a Bosnian girl sits beside a Russian girl born in Japan and a Guyanese boy is dating a Vietnamese girl. Arguments break out not because of differences in ethnicities or

beliefs; rather over whether a group should go to Taco Bell for happy hour slushies or stick to the traditional Chick-fil-A study spot after school.

“I’ve always felt like there was no way of fitting in at Tucker because there was nothing to fit in to,” said Tommy Manley, a current Tucker student in the Class of 2020. “The sheer amount of different perspectives available, although overwhelming at first, has come to be one of my most cherished aspects of the school. It’s truly a home for anyone.”

Tucker also extends an immersive [English as a Second Language](#) program to help the 17.6% of students who are in the process of [learning English](#). The Spanish Club and Spanish Honor Society partner with ESL teachers to help students with their classes. This partnership often leads to friendships and new cultural understanding which helps immigrants feel accepted and genuinely part of the Tucker family.

Students seize the opportunity to learn about different cultures and languages from their diverse friends. Hodžić describes this environment of peers as being, “bound to learn a thing or two in a different language or about a different culture,” after spending seven hours a day together for four years. These cultures are celebrated, and friends learn about traditions different from their own.

Racial and ethnic groups aside, [economically disadvantaged](#) students make up 51.4% of the school, a statistic the students do not let define them. The Tucker atmosphere is truly one of focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses. Other schools in the area may have brand new, parent-funded, basketball jerseys while [Tucker athletes](#) still wear Chenille patched shirts from 10 years prior; the students do not let a uniform dictate how well they play their game.

Teachers extend their passion beyond the classroom to mentor and help their students. One example is the robotics team mentor taking a student to get a haircut because he and his family could not afford it. The staff at the school put in the extra effort to understand their students' situations so they can tailor their teaching style to bring about success.

"I have the privilege to work alongside an all-star team of teachers who are committed to our students and to the mastery of their craft," said Phipps.

The school [pulls students](#) from all over Henrico County. Therefore, a student from the affluent West End who has always had the new iPhone learns about their friend who holds down two jobs to help their mother pay the bills. Yet, there is no division along socioeconomic lines. The students accept and value one another for their differences and simply enjoy their high school experience together.

Tucker provides more than just a strong social and cultural experience. The school is home to numerous [educational programs](#) that provide a rigorous and hands-on academic experience.

"When we interview teachers, we make it very clear that this school is culturally and ethnically diverse, but it is also diverse in the programs that we have," said Raymond. "Within the almost 1,700 student body, we have an IB program, a dual enrollment program, a Spanish language immersion program, an ROTC program, and a large population of English Learners. We also have students with intellectual disabilities."

Tucker students may not have the best facilities in the county. Other schools have [practice fields](#) specifically for their marching band while Tucker band kids practice marching

drills in the parking lot, weaving around parked cars. The school will, however, be [rebuilt](#) over the next few years promising a new Tucker era.

June [graduation](#) is the culmination of all Tucker stands for. More than 400 students dressed in blue and white gowns line the VCU Siegel Center in downtown Richmond. The chorus, orchestra and band stand proudly on the stage, ready to commence the iconic Pomp and Circumstance processional song. Thousands of parents, grandparents, siblings and friends fill the stadium seats, cameras at the ready, prepared to hunt for their student in the sea of white and blue.

One by one, the class administrator announces the graduates over the loudspeakers as their walk across the stage is projected on the jumbotrons. Even though Raymond asks the parents to hold their applause until all the graduates walk, quick cheers for each student echo around the stadium. For some, they are the first in their family to ever graduate high school. For others, this is just the first graduation on the path to becoming a doctor. Regardless, just as a group of diverse students come together in the classroom, generations of different parents gather in the building to celebrate the graduates.

There is a special connection between all Tucker [alumni](#). It is easy to relate to someone who also tore their t-shirt on an old window unit air conditioner or ran away from a bee while eating lunch. It is amazing that, regardless of where all these people started out – foreign countries, different areas of the county or speaking different languages - they will forever have Tucker in common. This commonality among a sea of differences is what makes John Randolph Tucker High School the magnificent school and community it is.