

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS (DCPS)**



Public Hearing
on

Bill 24-286, August Wilson High School Designation Act of 2021
Bill 24-339, John Lewis Elementary School Designation Act of 2021

Testimony of
Shanita Burney
Engagement and Partnerships Officer of DC Public Schools

Good afternoon Chairman Mendelson, members of the Committee of the Whole, and staff. I am Shanita Burney, Engagement and Partnerships Officer of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). I am proud to share that I'm in my 13th year at DCPS, a District resident, and have a 10th grader at Roosevelt High School. Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today and thank you for your interest in and support for our work.

DC Public Schools operates over 100 schools, and our mission requires us to deliver education in a school environment that provides the conditions for student success, close the achievement gap, and ensure schools are community anchors that reflect the communities they serve. Schools are named after people, places, or services provided at that location. School names serve to identify the school community, establish a legacy, and develop a sense of pride among students and families in their schools and the traditions of DCPS. Some of these names, however, have perpetuated a history that is not reflective of the values of our school communities and city at large. In summer 2020, Mayor Bowser formed the District of Columbia Facilities and Commemorative Expressions ([DCFACES](#)) Working Group. She charged the group with evaluating named DC government-owned facilities and making recommendations as to what, if any, actions need to be taken if the person the facility is named for is inconsistent with DC values and in some way encouraged the oppression of African Americans and other communities of color or contributed to our long history of systemic racism. In the group's [executive summary](#), released in early September 2020, they recommended renaming 21 DCPS schools and school buildings, including Woodrow Wilson High School and West Elementary School.

Community Engagement

DCPS intends to carry out the 21 name changes over the next four to five years for schools whose namesakes are not reflective of current DCPS values. Any individual for whom a DC Public School is to be named must have made a significant contribution to society and must exemplify DCPS' mission, vision and values. The individual must not have enslaved other humans, supported the institution of slavery, furthered systemic racism, supported the oppression of persons of color and/or women, been a member of any supremacist organization, or committed any acts that violate the DC Human Rights Act. In this process, DCPS understands that community engagement is crucial at every step.

Thus, there were similar public engagement processes for both Wilson and West. These processes follow the public engagement strategy that DCPS employs for school renaming. The public engagement included an online nomination form for the new school names, which was shared with school staff, students, families, alumni, community groups, citywide listservs, and via social media. DCPS representatives also attended several stakeholder meetings, including Parent Teacher Student Organization meetings (PTSO) and Local School Advisory Team Meeting (LSAT), and met with Student Government Association (SGA) members to discuss the name change process, share the nomination form, and answer questions. A group of DCPS and school stakeholders were selected to vet the nominated names and decided on a short list to be published for final public input. The public input form was shared through the same channels as the nominations form and directly with individuals who submitted a nomination. Both forms received substantial amount of community input. Through this process, DCPS supported and engaged these schools' community members and considered their input in the decision-making process. At the same time, this process empowered all members of the community – but especially students – to look closely at their school's history and community identity.

Woodrow Wilson

Wilson's situation was unique because there had been ongoing public discussion about changing the name, which had broad support among stakeholders, including current students and families, staff members, alumni, the Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC), and the broader DC community. Woodrow Wilson's racist legacy and policies of segregation acutely carried out against Black federal employees in the District, and particularly Black residents of Reno City, where the school now sits, make him an unseemly, continued namesake for the school and do not reflect our city's values. There were over 2,000 nomination submissions and feedback from over 6,000 individuals on the Public Input survey in Fall 2020. From the seven finalists, August Wilson received the most votes of those who indicated a preference – 29%. The proposed rename from Woodrow Wilson High School to August Wilson High School honors the Pulitzer and Tony award-winning playwright who chronicled the African American experience in the 20th Century.

August Wilson's ten plays, together entitled The American Century Cycle, have graced the stages of Washington, D.C. for decades. His work is part of DCPS' high school curriculum, allowing our scholars to explore the timeless themes represented in his words and characters. The August Wilson Legacy strongly holds Mr. Wilson's words as an important instrument in the affirmation of our humanity, in this changing, and often challenging world.

West

In the case of West, Joseph R. West, the school's namesake, is found to have ordered the torture and murder of an Apache chief, prompting the decision to change the school's name. There were 140 nomination submissions and feedback from over 600 individuals on the public input survey in spring 2021. DCPS and school stakeholders met multiple times in March 2020 after the public survey was launched to decide on six final names for additional public input. From the six finalists, John Lewis received the most votes of those who indicated a preference – 31%. Survey results indicated John Lewis Elementary School as the overall preferred name and the most popular among almost all respondent subgroups. The proposed rename from West Elementary School to John Lewis Elementary School honors the legacy of a longtime Georgia congressman and champion of civil and human rights and civic engagement. Congressman Lewis was a leader of the civil rights movement, during which time he suffered arrest and police brutality, and he helped to organize the 1963 March on Washington. Throughout his long career in public service, Congressman Lewis was also a staunch supporter of DC statehood, cosponsoring legislation to make Washington, DC the fifty-first state every term he served in Congress. Known for powerful speeches, he advocated for getting into "good trouble" all his life. Congressman Lewis was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011. Lewis's extraordinary life provides lessons for activists today on how to confront racial violence, forge productive alliances and transform American democracy.

Moving Forward

DC Public Schools will continue our commitment to ensuring that the names of our schools reflect the mission and values of our community. We're proud to celebrate and honor the legacy of the late Congressman John Lewis and the legacy of the award-winning African American Playwright August Wilson. At DCPS, where a majority of our school leaders and students, and nearly half of our teachers, identify as Black, we are committed to ensuring that the names we

call our schools reflect our values, our community, and our commitment to social justice. DCPS is committed to diversity and recognizes the barriers faced by marginalized and underrepresented groups, and we will honor these groups throughout our renaming process.

I want to close by recognizing the contribution of our school communities through their advocacy and dialogue at this pivotal moment in the District's history. I'm happy to answer any questions you have at this time.