

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



Public Hearing
on
PR 23-892, the “Sense of the Council Woodrow Wilson High School Renaming
Protocol Resolution of 2020”

Testimony of
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Officer, Communications and Engagement

Before the
Council of the District of Columbia
Committee of the Whole
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairperson

September 15, 2020
Live via Zoom Video Conference Broadcast



Good afternoon, Chairperson Mendelson, members of the Committee of the Whole, and staff. I am Shanita Burney, the Communications and Engagement Officer for the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). At DCPS, I support our goal to listen to and engage with families and stakeholders to build trust, share information, and gather feedback with a focus on closing the opportunity gap.

Over the last six months, parents, families, and students have witnessed and been a part of a unique moment in history. In addition to adapting to new ways of communicating and learning, communities have responded to racial injustice as the world changed dramatically. At this pivotal moment in the fight to end racism and police brutality, I am proud to share that DCPS has responded to the call.

We have maintained our commitment to support students and families every step of the way. This spring, our team worked tirelessly to provide a quality learning experience and to reopen strong this fall. We have taken several important steps to support our community, such as:

- Launching Parent University, which features online learning tools focused on answering questions top of mind and providing families with additional resources;
- Creating a new universal Cornerstone, which allows students to reflect and learn about themselves, aspects of their identities, how their experiences shape their view of the world, and what it means to be global citizens in this unprecedented time; and
- Finally, to strengthen our equity work, during the summer of 2020, DCPS engaged teachers to serve as Race and Equity Fellows to audit all of the social studies and English/Language Arts curriculum and develop a digital version of the African American History and Culture course for students to engage on issues of race and equity.

DCPS appreciates Mayor Bowser's work to convene the District of Columbia Facilities and Commemorative Expressions Working Group (DC FACES), in response to calls from our community, which has taken the important first steps towards addressing the names of public buildings and spaces by completing a comprehensive review. DCPS agrees with Mayor Bowser, that the name of Wilson High School must change. Woodrow Wilson's racist legacy and policies of segregation acutely carried out against Black federal employees in the District and Black residents of Reno City, where the school now sits, make him an unseemly namesake for the school and does not reflect DCPS values of Students First, Equity, Excellence, Teamwork, Courage, and Joy.

At DCPS, where a majority of our school leaders and students, and nearly half of our teachers identify as Black, we are committed to fulfilling the efforts of social activism and ensuring that the names we call our schools reflect our values and commitment to diversity. I do want to take some time to highlight that Wilson HS is not unique among our schools. We welcome further partnership as we continue to evaluate the names of schools across all eight wards and whether they accurately reflect the District of Columbia's values. In doing so, DCPS will work to serve as an advocate for our students and families who are furthest from opportunity.

DCPS' Approach to Renaming Existing Schools

School names help to identify the school community, establish a legacy, and develop a sense of pride in the traditions of DCPS and our schools. School buildings create opportunities for students to engage and encounter holistic learning experiences and provide a space where students can feel both loved and challenged. Murals and shared communal spaces affirm school identity, honor a school's artistic and cultural heritage, support students, foster a sense of community, and fill students with pride. Since opening in 1936, the Ward 3 high school has consistently been one of Washington, DC's premier public high schools, with a student body from all over the city.



As we look to our next steps, our goal is to inspire future generations of students and affirm students' cultures and communities through our school naming process. Successful renamings bring together two strands of important work: engagement around a proposed new name and updating the school facility, as well as any school materials, to reflect the new name. Currently, there is no consensus on alternative names.

Community engagement will be the first critical step in our approach to renaming this Ward 3 high school. We appreciate the incredible work of the DC History and Justice Collective, which has already authentically engaged the community around removing Wilson's name from the Ward 3 high school. They have found broad support among stakeholders including current students and families, staff members, alumni, the Advisory Neighborhood Council (ANC), and the broader DC Community. For our next steps, we plan to solicit options for a new name, determine relative support, and propose a new name for this high school. This will involve surveys, engagement sessions, and historical research. Our goal is to have a final proposed name with broad input from the community this Winter.

On the facility side, there are many spaces within a school building that display the name, mascot, and colors; these architectural elements help to shape the school's identity. For this building, we estimate the total facility costs to be approximately \$1.2 million in capital funding which includes, athletic fields, banners, flooring, a marque, public art, and signage, among other physical assets. Currently, DCPS' Capital Improvement Plan (CIP), as approved by the DC Council, does not include these investments.

As we look to the future, DCPS is fully committed to identifying an appropriate namesake that represents DCPS' mission and values and has made a significant impact on society to adequately mirror the rich legacy and activism of this school's community. To do this, we must also ensure there are adequate time and resources to maintain and build on the community's legacy.

Conclusion

I appreciate the support of Mayor Bowser and the DC Council in this historic moment as we reflect on the joint responsibility that we share in creating safe, affirming, and empowering spaces for students and our communities. I do want to recognize that Wilson HS is just one of the 21 school buildings that the Mayor's DC FACES report identified as potentially in need of change. DCPS will work to ensure that the citywide renaming process moves forward equitably and works to empower the voices of diverse stakeholders.

It is our goal that students are equipped to be leaders and change agents who positively influence their schools, communities, and the world. The time to examine how we can commemorate public spaces to honor and uplift the legacy of the District of Columbia is now. Thank you for your partnership. I am happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.

