

A RESOLUTION

23-553

IN THE COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

October 20, 2020

To declare the sense of the Council that the Council supports efforts to reconsider the name of Woodrow Wilson High School and, more broadly, the names of all public schools, and that the District of Columbia Public Schools should act quickly to update its school naming protocol, and to call on the District of Columbia Public Schools to convene community meetings to consider whether the name of Woodrow Wilson High School should be changed, and, if so, what name should be selected.

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, That this resolution may be cited as the “Sense of the Council Woodrow Wilson High School Renaming Protocol Resolution of 2020”.

Sec. 2. The Council finds that:

(1) On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, an African American, was murdered by Minneapolis police during an arrest. Within days, protests arose across the globe to demand an end to police violence against Black men and women, and to demand local and federal reforms to address racial injustices and inequities built into the functioning of our justice systems. These calls for reform, however, are not limited to our police departments, courts, and penal system. Jurisdictions have been called on to engage in a top-to-bottom, ongoing review of their laws, regulations, operations, and programs to identify and address where these policies and practices have a disparate impact on persons of color.

(2) In addition to elevating the need to broadly assess existing policies and practices for any racially disparate impact, the recent protests have drawn attention to the buildings, monuments, and statues across the country that honor historical figures who benefited from or supported white supremacy and discrimination against persons of color. A number of jurisdictions have taken action to rename buildings and remove statues and monuments in recognition of the very real harm caused to persons and communities of color by honoring individuals who supported and enabled racial prejudice. Honoring such individuals also sends a harmful and wrong message to the broader community that racial discrimination is acceptable and even laudatory.

(3) In December 2017, the District of Columbia Public Schools (“DCPS”) promulgated a protocol for school naming that includes procedures for residents to petition DCPS to rename a particular school. According to the protocol, one key factor in DCPS’s decision to name a school after a particular person is whether the individual “[r]epresents the DCPS mission, vision, and values.” However, the protocol does not contemplate a proposal including information on why the legacy of an individual for whom a school building is currently named represents—or does not represent—the mission, vision, and values of DCPS.

(4) Woodrow Wilson High School is a DCPS secondary school located in the Tenleytown neighborhood of Ward 3. The high school’s catchment area is the largest of all DCPS schools and includes portions of Wards 1, 2, 3, and 4. Even with such a large catchment area, the school’s student body includes students from all 8 wards; for school year 2018-2019, 38% of Woodrow Wilson High School students were considered out-of-boundary. The school also boasts one of the most diverse student bodies in the District. For school year 2018-2019, the school’s student body was 31% Black, 21% Hispanic or Latino, 37% White, 6% Asian, 1% Native American or Alaskan Native, and 4% mixed-race.

(5) Woodrow Wilson High School is named after President Woodrow Wilson. President Wilson is most often remembered for his leadership during World War I and his role in the creation of the League of Nations. As president, however, Wilson instituted efforts to segregate government offices and engage in racially discriminatory hiring practices. Wilson and his administration oversaw the segregation, demotion, and firing of Black employees throughout the federal government for the sole reason that they were Black. This, in turn, facilitated destruction of the growing black middle class in the District of Columbia.

(6) For a number of years, advocates have petitioned DCPS to change the name of Woodrow Wilson High School and to honor another individual whose legacy reflects and celebrates the school’s diversity and history. In addition, students, faculty, and staff have engaged in school-wide discussions about the changing of the school’s name, including holding a community forum in 2019. Although advocates and members of the community have suggested a number of new names for the school, neither the advocates nor DCPS have come to consensus on a new name, nor initiated a formalized process to select or approve one.

(7) Under DCPS’s school naming protocol, a proposal to rename a school must include not only the request to change the existing name, but also a specific recommendation for the new name. After receiving a complete proposal, DCPS will decide whether to move forward with the name change. Under the protocol, only then will DCPS begin community engagement, which may include direct communication with the school community, school surveys and petitions, and public meetings with the relevant Local School Advisory Team, Advisory Neighborhood Commission (“ANC”), and Community Civic Association.

(8) By requiring that a specific name be selected before the start of any community engagement, DCPS does not provide a formal opportunity for the community to propose or consider additional potential new names for a school.

(9) In Spring 2020, DCPS initiated a review of its school naming protocol. During this review, which is ongoing, DCPS can update the protocol to provide for community engagement prior to selection of a particular name for consideration; such a change would help facilitate the high school and Tenleytown communities coming to consensus on a new name for the Wilson High School. However, it is unclear how long the review of the protocol will take, and advocates have raised concerns that it could be months before the new protocol is finalized, significantly delaying efforts to identify a new name for Woodrow Wilson High School.

Sec. 3. It is the sense of the Council that:

(1) The Council supports efforts to change the name of Woodrow Wilson High School and, more broadly, to consider whether other public schools in the District of Columbia should be renamed to remove honorifics no longer acceptable to today's community that comprises the District of Columbia.

(2) The name of a school should honor a person, event, or place for a clearly articulated reason and should preferably be a source of inspiration for its students or integrally relate to the history of the school.

(3) DCPS must act quickly to update its school naming protocol, which should enable procedures for DCPS to seek community input on potential new names prior to a specific name being proposed or otherwise selected, and include procedures that permit a proposal to provide information on how the current name of a school does not represent community values or fulfill a valuable purpose, such as being inspirational.

(4) DCPS should immediately convene virtual community meetings, at least one each with the school's Local School Advisory Team, ANC 3E, and the Tenleytown Neighbors Association, to consider whether the name of Woodrow Wilson High School should be changed, and, if so, what name should be selected, and, following those meetings, DCPS should provide the Council with a summary of the discussion, including any recommendations made.

Sec. 4. The Council shall transmit a copy of this resolution, upon its adoption, to the Mayor, the Deputy Mayor for Education, the Chancellor of DCPS, the principal of Woodrow Wilson High School, and the Chairpersons of ANC 3E, the Tenleytown Neighbors Association, and the Woodrow Wilson High School Local School Advisory Team.

Sec. 5. This resolution shall take effect immediately.