

Dear Superintendent Guerrero,

During this time of racism and hatred, many institutions are currently trying to figure out what the “right thing” to do is. Nike is donating \$40 million to Black community organizations. Ben and Jerry’s is speaking out and calling upon the Congress to pass H.R. 40, legislation that would create a commission to study the effects of slavery and discrimination from 1619 to the present. Everlane is donating \$75,000 to the Equal Justice Initiative and \$75,000 to the ACLU. The question now is: what are we, Woodrow Wilson High School, going to do?

To me, the answer is clear: remove our connection to Woodrow Wilson, a racist KKK supporter, who actively perpetuated the dangerous systems of racism that remain today.

Wilson oppressed the Black community during his term in office. He fired 15 Black supervisors in the federal service and replaced them with white people. Subsequently, following his example, the Treasury and Post Office let go of many Black employees. Not to mention “in 1914 the federal government began requiring photographs on job applications” (Matthews 2015). When civil-rights leader and founder of The Guardian Newspaper, William Monroe Trotter, came to a meeting with Wilson with a petition with 20,000 signatures from 38 states protesting against the segregation of the government employees, Wilson replied that he was just trying to prevent friction and that “if you take it as humiliation...and sow the seed of that impression all over the country, why the consequence will be serious” (Lehr 2015). He also increased, normalized, and institutionalized segregation in the workplace, in housing, in education, and in our entire nation, causing the integration and development of systemic inequality that continues to harm the Black community today.

Wilson also stopped the Racial Equality Proposal at the Versailles Convention in 1919. 11 out of 17 members at the meeting supported it, but “Wilson, who was presiding, arbitrarily decided that the amendment had been defeated because the vote wasn't unanimous” (Matthews 2015). Through this action, he denied the rights of racial equality for people of color.

Additionally, Woodrow Wilson supported the KKK. Wilson wrote the book *A History of the American People*, that both spread the message of the KKK and enforced it. In said book Wilson writes “The white men of the South were aroused by the mere instinct of self-preservation...until at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan, a veritable empire of the South, to protect the Southern country” (Matthews 2015). Woodrow Wilson allowed D.W. Griffith to screen his film “Birth of A Nation” at the White House in February of 1915. This movie portrayed Black men as rapists, the Black community as brutish and inferior, and glorified the KKK. This film was even used as a KKK recruitment tool. Yet Woodrow Wilson endorsed it. “Upon viewing The Birth of a Nation at a special White House screening, President Woodrow Wilson reportedly remarked, ‘It's like writing history with lightning. My only regret is that it is all so terribly true’” (Benbow 2010).

How can we have a school named after a president who resegregated the nation, stopped efforts in racial equality and supported the KKK? How can we grow as a community under his name? Woodrow Wilson himself justified his actions because he "wished the matter adjusted in a way to make the least friction" (Matthews 2015). Is our school keeping its name to avoid friction? Is that what “The Wilson Way” has become: taking the path of least resistance, rather than the path of justice? (*The “Wilson Way” refers to what we represent as Wilson students. It is our motto: Diligence, Excellence and Integrity*)

Many people, both staff and students, have been wanting to change the name of Woodrow Wilson High School for years, yet it has not been changed. I ask that we finally make it happen.

The cost of completely renaming a school can be anywhere from \$350,000 to \$500,000 (Smith Amos 2013 and Mitchell 2018). In Fairfax County Virginia it was estimated that their name change would cost about \$368,00 due to the need for new school signs, sports jerseys, band uniforms etc. (Mitchell 2018). To decrease the potential costs when we rename Wilson, we propose that we name it after a different Wilson. Since most of our signs, jerseys, uniforms, sweatshirts, etc. only have “Wilson” and not “Woodrow Wilson” on it, the cost of name changing would be reduced significantly.

Two of the following new names of been suggested:

1. Harriet Wilson, the First Black Female Novelist

In 1859, Harriet E. Wilson, an African American woman from Milford, New Hampshire, published a novel addressing racism in the pre-Civil War North.

2. Margaret Bush Wilson, American civil rights activist and attorney

Margaret Bush Wilson served (1975–83) as the first African American female chair of the NAACP board of directors. She attended Lincoln University Law School, Jefferson City, Mo. (L.L.B., 1943), and became the second Black woman to practice law in the state. Margaret Bush Wilson was instrumental in helping Black real-estate brokers, including her father, pursue legal action that culminated in the landmark Supreme Court ruling *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948), which

provided for equal housing rights for African Americans. She also became the first Black woman in Missouri to run (1948) for a seat in the U.S. Congress.

Within any movements for change, there will be push-back. Some people argue that Wilson was a great president, despite his discriminatory actions. Of course we must acknowledge the positive things Wilson has done: he guided the nation through World War I; he improved the economic situation of the nation; he even earned the Nobel Peace Prize (“The Nobel Peace Prize 1919.”) Some may say that the positives outweigh the negatives. We cannot deny that Woodrow Wilson was a pronounced historical figure. However, one must acknowledge Wilson’s strengths in the same way one must acknowledge that he was lacking in morals. One can be good at their job and still be lacking in morality. Harvey Weinstein was a fantastic producer, and calling out his perversion and indecency does nothing to his producing skills. One can both be beneficial to society and a disgrace to society. While Wilson is both, it is easy to argue that he may fall more to the side of disgrace, and even if not, one must admit that it would be best to name a school after somebody who has no disgraceful side and *only* a beneficial side.

While this seems challenging, many other schools named after Wilson have changed their names and/or are working towards changing their names.

- 1.The Woodrow Wilson Elementary School in Northern California is renaming itself as the Michelle Obama Elementary (Young 2020)

- 2.Camden School Superintendent Katrina McCombs said the district this summer will rename its Woodrow Wilson High School (Burney 2020)

- 3.Monmouth University in New Jersey said it would remove Woodrow Wilson’s name from its marquee building (Levenson 2020)

4. Students at a Wilson-branded high school in Washington, D.C., are also petitioning for a name change (Young 2020).

5. A petition is going around to change the name of Woodrow Wilson High School located in Long Beach, California (Tim Grobaty 2020)

Some may argue that by changing the name of the school we are erasing history. They choose to memorialize not Wilson, but his existence in American history because “isn’t the cost of erasing history higher than keeping it?” They often ask “aren’t we supposed to teach history so we do not repeat it?” Yet, it must be remembered that changing a name of a school does not erase history, it merely continues the story. Changing the name of the school will become part of our history, and it will serve as a reflection of the world around us. History lives and breathes through our world and the changes within it. It is not stagnant. If somebody truly wants to argue about preserving history then they must also help preserve the present. Today is tomorrow's history. As we all know, what is going on today will be written in history books for the next generations, and when it is, will we be a contributor to it? Will we play a part in the history we value so much or will we stand still and let it repeat?

In this very moment, we have the choice to either continue honoring a white supremacist who reinforced segregation or we can change the narrative, working towards equity and inclusion by uplifting communities of color. This is the very first step, the bare minimum of equity work. I have not even begun to address the lack of diverse curriculum or the disciplinary policies in public schools that foster the school to prison pipeline. I have just scratched the surface of all the work we need to do. But “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” Lao Tzu, and it’s time to take ours.

Thank you for your time,

Mia Sedory

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