

Opposition mounts to San Francisco school board approval of racist renaming of schools

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The San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) board of education voted last Tuesday to approve the renaming of 44 schools in the district on the basis of racist politics. The list of school names to be removed includes monumental revolutionary figures such as Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

The renaming of schools on the basis of racist politics and the falsification of history must be rejected as an attack on historical truth and the immensely progressive and democratic legacy of the Founding Fathers and Lincoln, and the world revolutionary significance of the American Revolution and the Civil War. The former gave the world the Declaration of Independence, which declared that “all men are created equal,” and the latter put an end to slavery in the American South.

On the basis of making skin color the measure of all things, the SFUSD denigrates truly progressive historical figures by removing their names while continuing to promote political stooges of the ruling class and wealthy business people by keeping their names on schools in the district.

The school sites on the list for removal will have less than three months to provide input on potential new names, and the board-appointed SFUSD School Names Advisory Committee will present to the school board a list of 44 new names for approval in April.

Last Tuesday’s 6–1 vote is the outcome of a 2018 resolution that called for a formal process to rename schools named after historical figures that district officials and the advisory committee deemed to have “significantly diminished the opportunities of those amongst us to the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of

happiness...”

The contributions to human progress by Lincoln and the Founding Fathers are presented as meaningless by district officials, and these figures are ripped from their historical contexts and slandered as garden variety racists.

Meanwhile, capitalists responsible for the exploitation of workers who fall in line with the committee’s racist politics—such as Bank of America founder A.P. Giannini and Willie L. Brown, the first African-American mayor of San Francisco and political patron of Vice President Kamala Harris and California Governor Gavin Newsom—will continue to be honored within the district.

When, at a public online meeting last August, advisory committee chairman Jeremiah Jeffries listed Abraham Lincoln High School, committee members shouted, “Yes!” They then burst into laughter as Jeffries typed “yes” next to Lincoln’s name and moved on to the next. The entire “discussion” lasted five seconds.

The public is expected to review the committee’s “research” on a Google spreadsheet, which, in the case of Lincoln, argues that he is responsible for “discriminatory and damaging policies, like placing Indians on reservations” and “the Dakota 38+2, largest mass hanging in US history.” As the WSWs explained in its essay on Lincoln and the Dakota 38, this tragic event was also the largest ever act of executive clemency, in which Lincoln saved the lives of 265 Dakota men.

Community members have come out in opposition to the renaming and in defense of Lincoln and the Founding Fathers by submitting letters to the

committee and speaking out in public comment forums.

On January 20, David Lockmiller, a 32-year resident of Richmond, spoke in defense of Lincoln. He noted his recent letter to the editor titled “Do Not Rename Lincoln High School,” which was published in the local *Richmond Review*. Lockmiller used his allotted time to cite Lincoln’s moving December 1862 letter to Congress in which he explains his reasoning for pouring over the records of all 303 Dakota men sentenced to death, showing his consideration of the Dakota defendants as “people” who had the right to the presumption of innocence.

Dan, a 1964 graduate of Lincoln High School, asked the committee, “Where can I find the research that was done that led to the conclusions and recommendations of removing Lincoln’s name?” Dan noted that he had recently submitted a ten-page paper presenting his concerns about the renaming of Lincoln High and had yet to receive a response.

During last Tuesday’s board meeting, Lope Yap Jr., the vice-president of the George Washington High School alumni association, said, “Abolitionist Frederick Douglass praised Lincoln. Several historians have refuted the advisory committee’s conclusion regarding Lincoln. Mount Vernon sent you a letter extolling Washington and his overall accomplishments, even after pointing out Washington’s dark history.”

Micah, a sophomore at Lowell High School, stated her opposition to the renaming of the schools. “There is a lot of historical negligence that happened because they do not have a historian on the advisory committee,” Micah said. “On the Google sheet of the renaming committee, they cite Wikipedia as a source. As a high school student at Lowell, I’m not even allowed to use Wikipedia as a source for my history papers, let alone spend millions of dollars to rename a school that may not even need to be renamed.”

Board members patted themselves on the back Tuesday, describing the decision to rename the schools as “just,” “equitable” and “moral.” These same individuals are supporting the reopening of schools in San Francisco even as the coronavirus rages throughout the city and beyond.

SFUSD Superintendent Vincent Matthews and board officials are in lockstep with Democratic politicians, including California Governor Gavin Newsom and San Francisco Mayor London Breed, in supporting the

reopening of the schools. They originally planned to reopen schools for the district’s youngest as well as special education students under a hybrid model as early as January 25. However, the district faced widespread opposition from teachers and parents and effectively delayed reopening until March 25.

San Francisco is in the state’s highest tier for COVID-19 transmission, with a 3.9 percent positivity rate and a reported daily rate of 27 new cases per 100,000 people. This rate is currently rising. The UK, Brazil and California variants of the virus have been detected in the San Francisco Bay Area in recent days, causing major concern for residents throughout the city.

In January, Governor Newsom updated his state guidelines for reopening, allowing pre-K-6 schools to reopen for in-person instruction, even though these schools may be in areas with widespread transmission. The Biden administration has placed the reopening of schools at the center of his response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is growing resistance to this deadly policy from teachers throughout the country, most notably in Chicago, where educators have voted to strike against the Democratic mayor’s order that they return to school by February 1.

Within this context, the decision to rename schools in San Francisco on a racist basis underscores the reactionary and anti-working class content of this type of middle-class politics, relentlessly promoted by the Democratic Party. Precisely as the working class enters into struggle against the brutal policies of the ruling class, which are based on protecting corporate profits at the expense of human life, upper-middle class and bourgeois forces double down on their efforts to use racial politics to divide the working class.



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