



We organize families and committed residents of San Francisco into a collective political voice.



A REPORT ON SFUSD SCHOOL RENAMING

by Families for San Francisco, January 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The project to rename many San Francisco schools has attracted attention and criticism, even drawing a public rebuke from Mayor Breed. These reactions motivated Families for San Francisco to analyze the Committee meetings and documentation to assess the work done for the school renaming project.

We strongly support the original Board of Education Resolution 184-10A1, which established the School Names Advisory Committee. Engaging the larger San Francisco community in a sustained discussion to reflect upon the appropriateness of those who have been honored with a public school name is important work.

Regretfully, upon careful review of all the meetings and documentation, our conclusion is that the work done by the School Names Advisory Committee is deeply flawed.

The larger San Francisco community is currently consumed with the public health emergency of SARS-CoV-2. Therefore, we urge the Board of Education to pause and reflect upon why the current process is flawed, so that when the pandemic is over the work can be restarted and carried out successfully.



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Summary of Conclusions

The Committee's process was flawed in two ways:

1. The Committee did not “engage the larger San Francisco community in a sustained discussion” as the original Resolution resolved.
2. The Committee was not guided or informed by professional historians or any other parties with the historical expertise required for the Committee to do its work.

As a result, the Committee's analysis was flawed in two ways:

1. The Guiding Principles used by the Committee was a “Just One Thing” test, where a historical figure was to be removed from a school name on the basis of just a single incident from a list of criteria. This led to:
 - a. Assuming the conclusion rather than engaging the debate authentically in some cases
 - b. Arbitrary application of the Guiding Principles
 - c. Lack of objective tests for the Guiding Principles
 - d. Tendency towards superficial analysis of many historical figures
2. The research process consisted of reviewing the names of schools “pretty quick with some really casual Google searches,” as one of the Committee members stated. [September 23, at the 2:10:47 mark] As a result, numerous factual errors were made, and relevant historical context was often not processed or considered.

Our Analysis

Section One: Flaws with the Committee's process

Section Two: Flaws with the Committee's analysis

Section Three: Case studies of the Committee's deliberations concerning ten specific historical figures



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Section One: Flaws with the Committee's Process

Flaw #1: The Committee did not engage the larger San Francisco community in a sustained discussion.

The original resolution resolves:

1. “to engage the larger San Francisco community in a sustained discussion regarding public school names,” that
2. “said process shall be led by a blue-ribbon panel,” and that
3. “said blue-ribbon panel shall offer findings and recommendations.”

While the process of the blue-ribbon panel (i.e. the School Renaming Advisory Committee) was left to the Committee to determine, the language clearly states the process was meant to be inclusive of the larger San Francisco community. One could imagine, for example, meetings to gather input and perspectives from the community on specific names of various schools. Instead, the Committee decided that it alone would decide which schools would be recommended to the Board of Education for a name change.

This decision not to engage the broader community appears to have been guided by the Committee Chair starting in the July 3 meeting, at 00:34:05 when the Committee Chair specifically defined the agenda of the meeting in a way that excluded the broader community from any involvement and made the Committee the sole decider:

So, for Committee members ... this is specifically around how to make decisions about what schools to rename. An example would be, like, if they were a slaveowner, then their name should be removed. So what should we be using to change things. So we're looking for very specific details and guiding principles around what that should be.

From that point on, the Chair guided the formation of the process of selecting schools for renaming in such a way that it would only be done by the Committee itself. The larger San Francisco community would not be engaged in a sustained discussion until after the schools to be renamed had been selected by the Committee.



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This insular school name selection process, which contradicted the language of the original Resolution, excluded the perspectives and considerations of many groups of people within the broader San Francisco community.

Flaw #2: The Committee was not guided or informed by professional historians or others with historical expertise.

In the August 12 meeting, when the Committee first starts to run through specific school names and discuss renaming, one of the Committee members raised concerns about the quality of the research the Committee could do on its own. In response, at 00:37:38, the Committee Chair said “people [i.e. Committee members] have been doing research and sharing facts, and then it’s on you as a Committee member, it’s your responsibility to go back and check those facts.” As explained by the Committee Chair, there would be no process for the Committee to check facts, or for outside experts to be consulted. Instead, each individual Committee member would assert facts and opinions as they chose, other members could either agree or challenge, and then the Committee would decide by consensus what to conclude.

Not satisfied, this same Committee member continued to press the issue by saying, “It [i.e. this process] seems pretty loosey-goosey,” reflecting a concern raised in a Public Comment that the Committee seemed to be acting as “judge and jury.” Eventually this Committee member asked [00:40:30] whether the Committee would be inviting historians to talk to the panel. The Chair dismissed the idea of consulting historians as follows [Comments begin at the 00:40:42 mark]:

Definitely not. What would be the point? History is written and documented pretty well across the board. And so, we don’t need to belabor history in that regard. We’re not debating that. There’s no point in debating history in that regard. Either it happened or it didn’t, as historians have referenced in their own histories. So, I don’t think there’s a discussion about that. And so, based on our criteria, it’s a very straightforward conversation. And so, no need to bring historians forward to say – they either pontificate and list a bunch of reasons why, or [say] they had great qualities. Neither are necessary in this discussion.

Excluding historians from the discussion led to factual errors, insufficient consideration of historical context, and subjective/inconsistent assessment of historical figures.



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Section Two: Flaws with the Committee's Analysis

Flaw #1: The Guiding Principles amounted to a “Just One Thing” test, where names were recommended for change if the Committee could identify a single incident that fit the listed criteria. [“Just One Thing” is a phrase used by the Committee Chair to refer to the application of the Guiding Principles on August 26 at the 1:20:32 mark. Similar phrases were used at different times to describe the application of the Guiding Principles.]

The Guiding Principles used to identify school names to be changed were as follows:

For identifying school names to be changed, the Committee will use any of the following criteria. We will seek to change the names of schools that are named for:

- *Anyone directly involved in the colonization of people*
- *Slave owners or participants in enslavement*
- *Perpetuators of genocide or slavery*
- *Those who exploit workers/people*
- *Those who directly oppressed or abused women, children, queer or transgender people*
- *Those connected to any human rights or environmental abuses*
- *Those who are known racists and/or white supremacists and/or espoused racist beliefs*

A single case of doing something categorized under one of the above points would lead to renaming. While these criteria seem superficially appealing and objective, the experience of the Committee surfaced the following problems:

Problem #1: Assuming the Conclusion

Some historical figures are controversial because they combine great virtues with significant flaws. A case in point is George Washington. It has never been a secret that Washington owned slaves. However, as we fully embrace the self-evident truth that Black lives matter as much as all other lives, we struggle to reassess Washington's historical legacy. Similar considerations apply to his role as a colonizer. Some people believe these flaws are so great that we should no longer honor him. Other people believe his virtues as a hero and a leader are so great that we should continue to honor him, even as we acknowledge his flaws. This is a difficult debate, whose resolution requires the sustained discussion with the larger community called for by the original resolution. Defining the criteria as a “Just One Thing” test effectively assumes the conclusion at the outset and circumvents the needed discussion. Without the sustained discussion with the community, the result is more likely to be division than enlightenment.



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Problem #2: Arbitrary Application

The Committee did not apply these Guiding Principles as a “Just One Thing” test in all cases. A case in point is Malcolm X. The Committee was going to decide quickly not to recommend Malcolm X Academy for renaming, until one of the members pointed out there was historical evidence that Malcolm X had “directly oppressed or abused women.” A ten minute discussion followed that rationalized reinterpreting the Guiding Principles to consider all Malcolm X had done in his life in order not to recommend the school for renaming. To be crystal clear, we agree wholeheartedly that Malcolm X should be judged by the entirety of his life. The same is true of all other historical figures.

Problem #3: Lack of Objective Tests

What does it mean to “espouse racist beliefs”? Does it mean something different in the mid-19th century versus the early 21st century? What does it mean to be “connected to any human rights abuses”? How does one judge whether someone is “directly involved” in the colonization of people? It became clear as the Committee reviewed names that what appeared at first to be objective criteria were really highly subjective, and required a much deeper understanding of historical context and facts than the Committee could bring.

Problem #4: Tendency Towards Superficial Analysis

When the test is to find “Just One Thing,” it discourages trying to understand the whole person or why that person was chosen as a school name in the first place, and instead encourages looking just for that “one thing” that will justify removal. This led in many cases to superficial analysis of historical figures.

Flaw #2: Because the research appears to have been done mainly via Google searches of Wikipedia and other online articles, numerous factual errors were made and historical context was often not processed or considered.

The [Google Sheet](#) that contains the research referenced by the Committee generally contains at most a single link per name, often to a Wikipedia page. (It is noteworthy that SFUSD generally teaches high school students that Wikipedia should only be used as a place to find sources, never as a source itself.) As noted above, one of the Committee members characterized the Committee’s research process as “pretty quick with some really casual Google searches” [[September 23, at the 2:10:47 mark](#)].



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The Google Sheet was created by a single Committee member, who appears to have done the majority of the research. The review process generally proceeded as follows: (1) the Committee Chair would ask the Committee member who created the Google Sheet whether the name in question met or did not meet criteria; (2) that member would say yes or no; (3) other members would either agree or offer comment until consensus was reached. This makes it difficult to discern how much research other Committee members did or what other sources were consulted beyond the Google Sheet other than what Committee members said in the discussion of a given name.

The factual errors and lack of processing of historical context are described in detail in the Case Studies.

This report is created by volunteers for Families for San Francisco. Our Mission is to organize families and committed residents of San Francisco into a collective political voice. Our goal is the continued betterment of San Francisco for all who love this city and make it their home. Learn more and join us at

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