



Board of Education Column

By Rebecca Knutson, Board of Education President

“What’s my role now?”

Following his death, I visited the George Floyd memorial in Minneapolis. Something guided me there. As I walked slowly and quietly up and down the streets, looking at the flowers, stuffed animals, signs, paintings, photographs, murals, names, and makeshift gravestones. I later saw a sign that told me, “You will hear many local BIPOC (Blacks, Indigenous People and People of Color) speakers, singers and artists that set the tone and usher in a spirit of change and or speak to the collective grief that we all feel. Sometimes it feels celebratory in nature. This is a space community members want to decentralize white feelings and prioritize Black pain. We ask that you honor the space.” As a white privileged person, I was welcome at the space as long as I honored it in the way I would honor any space dedicated for mourning and remembrance (i.e. Vietnam Veterans Memorial), and as an ally visiting the memorial, I was challenged to engage within my own community to affect change. So, the question I brought home was, “What’s my role now?”

It didn’t take long before I was pointed in a direction. Actually, it didn’t take long before the Fargo Public School District and Fargo Board of Education was pointed in a direction. Community members (including District staff, former staff, students, and alumni) were contacting us with the request to replace the Woodrow Wilson name from the District’s alternative high school. Additionally, a letter from the Fargo Human Relations Commission and North Dakota Human Rights Coalition requested the same, echoing a nationwide movement to discontinue glorifying the former president. Those in favor of a name change claimed Wilson enacted racist policies during his presidency to the extent that he “was not an accurate representation of where we stand on our mission as a part of Fargo Public Schools (FPS) or the Fargo-Moorhead community.”

The Board unanimously approved a motion at its October 13 meeting to rescind the name of Woodrow Wilson from the high school and to have a new name in place for the 2021-2022 school year. Preceding this was an extensive research and community engagement process conducted by the Board’s Communications, Engagement, and Advocacy Committee to fully and deeply understand the issue of Woodrow Wilson.

The District’s director of equity and inclusion helped to develop [Administrative Policy 3260: Naming and Renaming of Fargo Public School Buildings and Other Spaces](#), to assist the Board in making its decision. The policy follows guidelines developed by Stanford University and Princeton University and calls for an analysis of the harm caused by retaining the name, the potential harms of renaming, the relevant factors, and how they should be weighed.



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For those who may be concerned about erasing history, I invite you to consider this quote from a community member, which was shared during the community engagement process for renaming considerations: "The act of naming buildings, schools, and even structures is often going to eventually be problematic. Community standards change over time, and so a name, which at one point in time was a symbol of progress, can eventually come to be seen as backwards and 'behind the times.' When the community standards shift in this way, it is entirely appropriate to rename things to reflect the new community standards. It is our school, in our time, not the past's school. To not reconsider such things in the light of new information or even new values is to value tradition over progress. It is not a slight to the past to rename things. It is a reflection of our growth and progress as a modern society."

[Data from the community engagement survey on considering renaming Woodrow Wilson High School is linked here.](#)

Fargo Public Schools is committed to maintaining high standards of integrity and to providing a welcoming and inclusive environment for all members of the Fargo community. Fargo Public Schools believes diversity, equity, and inclusion are necessary for FPS to meet its mission to "achieve excellence by educating and empowering all students to succeed." [The FPS Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity Statement can be found here.](#) Please take the time to review the [Fargo Public Schools' Equity and Inclusion webpage](#) to learn more about our commitments. I will use our commitments to continue asking myself, "What's my role now?"

