

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
DC Public Schools (DCPS)**



**Public Hearing on
Bill 23-216, the “Wells Middle School Designation Act of 2019”
&
Bill 23-263, the “Lorraine H. Whitlock Elementary School Designation Act of
2019”**

**Testimony of
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Before the
Committee of the Whole
Chairman Phil Mendelson

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Room 412
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004



Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, members, and staff. I am Shanita Burney, Chief of the Office of Family and Public Engagement for the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). Beginning in August, I will lead the Communications and Engagement Office, which will oversee DCPS' commitment to transparent communications and meaningful public engagement. I am pleased to testify before you today on Bill 23-216, the "Wells Middle School Designation Act of 2019" and Bill 23-263, the "Lorraine H. Whitlock Elementary School Designation Act of 2019."

School names help to identify the school community, establish a legacy, and develop a sense of pride in the traditions of DCPS and our schools. After a several months-long community engagement process that the DCPS School Planning team led in collaboration with the Office of Family and Public Engagement, DC Public Schools is pleased to support Bill 23-216, the "Wells Middle School Designation Act of 2019" to honor Ida B. Wells, an iconic investigative journalist, feminist, civil rights activist, educator, and researcher.

Legacy of Ida B. Wells

Born into slavery in 1862, Ida B. Wells was a tireless advocate for the underserved and brought to light injustices against African Americans. At the age of sixteen, Wells became a teacher to support her family and began her career in the classroom. During this time, she also reported on the disgraceful conditions of black-only schools. Through her writing, she fought against discriminatory hiring and was an advocate for women's suffrage.

Wells dedicated much of her career as an investigative journalist, reporting the truth about the brutality of lynching in the United States after three of her friends were lynched by an angry white mob. She began documenting and compiling statistics on the widespread practice of lynching in the United States. Her writing and activism quickly made her the foremost leader in the crusade against lynching. She was a radical activist at time when being both radical and a woman was unheard of in our country. As a lifelong fighter for justice, DC Public Schools believes that honoring the life of Ida B. Wells will serve as a constant reminder that our students have the opportunity to be leaders and change agents who positively influence their community and the world each and every day.

School Naming Process

The school planning team launched the process to name New North Middle School in June 2018. The school, which will open at 405 Sheridan Street NW in August 2019, will be a neighborhood middle school available to all 6th grade families currently living in the boundaries of Brightwood Education Campus, LaSalle-Backus Education Campus, Takoma Education Campus, and Whittier Education Campus. The process was shaped by DCPS' School Naming Policy.¹ Nominations collected from the general public were carefully reviewed by parents, teachers, students, Coolidge HS alumni, and community members to help determine the finalists. Over the summer and into the fall, DCPS engaged with over 450 members of the community. The nomination to name the school after Ida B. Wells received positive feedback and input from current teachers, parents, and students alike.

¹ [School Naming Policy](#)



The New Wells Campus

Ida B. Wells MS will open in a fully modernized building in the fall of school year 2019-2020. The new facility will have dedicated classrooms for each subject, including rooms for art, choir, band, health, and a science lab. The building will have dedicated spaces for the middle school such as a gymnasium, locker rooms, and a multipurpose space. The collocated campus will provide students with access to many resources, including the Frank Williams Activity Center, a community health clinic and a day care center to promote student success. The main building, modernized stadium, and field will all be complete before the first day of school in August.

The inaugural 6th grade class at Wells will enjoy electives and clubs designed to prepare each student to positively influence society and thrive in life. An education at Wells will provide pathways to the Early College, Mass Media & Health Sciences Academies at Coolidge High Schools, and will allow students to reach their full potential through rigorous and joyful learning experiences provided in a nurturing environment. Each year a new grade will join the campus until it is a 6th-8th grade middle school in School Year 2021-2022.

DCPS is dedicated to providing excellent schools and modern facilities that promote and support successful teaching and learning. By establishing the Ida B. Wells MS, we honor a fearless woman and mark an important milestone for our city and for DCPS. This name reflects our values of courage, equity, and excellence. Her legacy will help establish a precedent that DCPS is consistently focused on creating a safe, affirming, and empowering space for students of color, and all students, to build community, confidence, and leadership skills.

Lorraine H. Whitlock Elementary School Designation Act of 2019

I would now like to share DCPS' perspective on Bill 23-216, the "Lorraine H. Whitlock Elementary School Designation Act of 2019." While we support the intent of the bill, we do have concerns about the process for re-naming Aiton Elementary. Based on DCPS' experience with re-naming schools, we know that proposing a name change for a school frequently leads to community unease and concerns from stakeholders that were not initially aware of the proposal. Because of this, we feel it is important to commit to a deep-level of engagement, as we did with both Ida B. Well MS and Boone ES. Based on those prior examples, we recommend a pause on this proposal until appropriate, full community engagement and consideration is possible.

We recognize that students, parents, and community members may wish to propose a name for a school, and the opportunity it presents to establish new traditions; however, we support our established and thoughtful school naming process, which, in the case of Ida B. Wells MS, was based on six months of engagement, including alumni outreach, multiple feedback sessions, and a community survey. We are open to considering a new name for Aiton, after a similar, collaborative engagement process.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important topic, today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.

