

TO: Board of Education
FROM: Donald Evans, Ed.D., Superintendent
DATE: November 15, 2017
SUBJECT: Recommendation to Discontinue the Name of
Le Conte Elementary School

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

In May 2017, a petition was received by the Superintendent's Office, signed by 179 members of the Le Conte Elementary School community, requesting that a review be conducted of the appropriateness of the Le Conte school name, pursuant to **BUSD Board Policy (BP) and Administrative Regulation (AR) 7310**.

According to the AR, a review process may be triggered by receiving a petition signed by the parents/guardians of at least one-third of the students or by three quarters of the staff. After discussion with the Superintendent's Executive Cabinet, it was determined that this requirement had been met, and a review process could proceed based on the petition. This was reported to the Board in public session on June 28, 2017.

It is worth noting that this is the first time we have implemented this version of the BP and AR 7310, which were revised in 2016. A recent update to AR 7310 requires that we take stock of lessons learned from the current experience with Le Conte before embarking on a name change process for another facility or school.

Community Meetings

As part of the name review process, AR 7310 requires at least one meeting with the families of students enrolled in the school, and a meeting with school employees. A meeting with parents/guardians was held on September 20, 2017, and a meeting with teachers and staff was held on September 27, 2017. Both meetings were well attended. While not required by the AR, there was also a small neighborhood focus group meeting held on October 16, 2017 through outreach to the Le Conte Neighborhood Association and via flyers to immediate neighbors.

Each meeting included these components:

- Getting to Know LeConte School and Community – values, pride, strengths
- BUSD Policy, Process and Timeline for name change decision-making
- Joseph Le Conte - role in Berkeley history, past and present controversy
- Table Talk - opportunities and challenges if changing the name
- Straw Poll - leaning for, undecided, against name change, and why
- Next Steps - suggestions for process

Characteristics of the Le Conte School and Community

Meeting participants were asked to share their views of Le Conte School community's characteristics and strengths. Parents/guardians and staff spoke of pride in the diversity of families and staff from many backgrounds, cultures, languages, race/ethnicities and national origins. They find a welcoming community with a

commitment to equity and to a two-way immersion (TWI) program which also embraces multiple cultures and languages. The school community members made frequent reference to the philosophy of *In Lak 'Ech*, a Mayan phrase meaning “you are my other me.” Neighbors spoke of the evolution of this southside neighborhood over time, from the Ohlone people to the early dairy farmers, to African-American residents, to the currently gentrifying demographic, and of their pride in a community with a history of political engagement.

Joseph Le Conte

AR 7310 requires that the review of a school named after an individual “*shall examine whether the individual, on the whole, has made outstanding contributions to the community or made contributions of state, national or worldwide significance in light of the Berkeley community's values and contemporary view on history.*”

Le Conte School is named after Joseph Le Conte. Following is a brief summary of his life, contributions, and views, gleaned from a review of a number of historical documents. Note that although Joseph’s brother John Le Conte was also prominent at the time, several **newspaper articles** appear to establish that the school was named after Joseph, or at least that the connection to Joseph was claimed by relatives.

When Le Conte School opened 125 years ago, in 1892, Joseph Le Conte was a highly respected professor of geology, botany and natural sciences at UC Berkeley (then known as the “State University”). He and his brother John, a professor of physics, joined the faculty in 1869, the year after the University was chartered. The Le Conte brothers had left their native Georgia, dissatisfied with the outcome of the Civil War which had reduced their income from their ownership of Woodmanston, a 3,356 acre plantation with over 200 slaves, growing rice on swamp land south of Savannah. John and Joseph had pursued studies in medicine and natural sciences and taught in various institutions. During the Civil War, each had active roles in the Confederate mining and niter works (source of munitions for the war effort); John due to expertise in chemistry and physics, and Joseph LeConte due to his knowledge of geology.

After the war, facing changes brought by Reconstruction, including a “negro legislature” that was considering admitting non-whites to college and to teaching positions, the Le Conte brothers considered emigrating. However, with the support of eminent peers such as Louis Agassiz of Harvard, they were welcomed to the new University of California, where John became acting president in 1869, served again as president from 1876 to 1881, and taught physics until his death in 1891.

Joseph Le Conte was a prolific author and popular lecturer, with interests ranging across many topics, including geology, evolution, and binocular vision. He served as president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the Geological Society of America. He loved camping in the California mountains, theorized about the glacial origins of the Yosemite Valley, befriended John Muir, and was an early board member of the Sierra Club. He died in 1901 while camping in Yosemite National Park.

In his autobiography, Joseph Le Conte stated he felt “oppressed by the ownership of slaves. Not because I felt any conscientious scruples about it, but because I felt distressingly the responsibility of their care.” He professed being happy to be relieved from the burden of administering a plantation, but expressed outrage at the “sudden enfranchisement” of former slaves, saying this “was the greatest political crime ever perpetrated by any people.” He was also active in writing and speaking about his theories of racial inferiority and the “evolutionary” benefits of slavery, which he felt could elevate the “lower races” through contact with those whom he believed were more evolved.

In 1892 Joseph Le Conte was invited to give a lecture at the Brooklyn Ethical Association. His lecture was published as “**The Race Problem in the South**,” and included statements that public education was not a solution to the “race problem.” Instead, he believed that it would take centuries of evolution to put races on an equal footing. Meanwhile he believed there should be education and property qualifications in order to vote, and he supported a poll tax that would “disenfranchise a large majority of the ignorant blacks....and some whites too.” His racist theories may have fallen upon at least some sympathetic ears locally, as Berkeley had a "Joseph LE Conte Chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy" which was active for many decades, and indeed was still meeting in Berkeley into the 1950's.

While the Daughters of the Confederacy might have taken pride in Joseph Le Conte, he was less popular with some of the women's suffrage leaders locally, as his theories of white supremacy were echoed by statements about the male dominance. Speaking before the 1895 Women's Congress in San Francisco, he apparently disappointed many in the audience with a long lecture about his theory that evolution among the “higher races” meant greater sex role differentiation, and his implication that the role of women should be limited and should not include the vote.

School Community Input

Le Conte families and staff have been talking for some time about the desire to have a new name for the school, particularly since the Board decided in 2012 to consolidate the District's Two-Way Immersion language program at Le Conte. Prior to the District-organized meetings, there had been several meetings and discussions at the school involving current parents and faculty. While not everyone was aware of the history of the name, those who learned more about Joseph Le Conte's writings were outraged to learn of his strong Confederate sympathies and his racist writings. The ad hoc group organized a petition (which was gathered in a relatively short time toward the end of the school year). The high response rate for the petition as well as near unanimity of the straw polls (conducted with anonymous response cards) at parent/guardian and staff meetings indicate very strong support for changing the name.

In discussions and in feedback cards, respondents were asked to share their motivations for a change in name. The most common reasons given were the desire for a name that is more reflective of the values, civic ideals, and educational goals for the school. Le Conte's explicitly white supremacist and racist ideology and sexist beliefs, is seen as a very poor match for a public elementary school where all are welcome, where many families have social justice values, and there is a strong focus

on equity and achievement for all. While the Le Conte brothers may have contributed a great deal to the early life of the University, more than one respondent has pointed out, that the Le Conte brothers might not actually approve of the very school that carries the Le Conte name.

Recommendation

I am recommending that the School Board discontinue the use of the name “Le Conte Elementary School” and that we work toward determining a new name for the school, pursuant to AR 7310.

In the Berkeley Unified School District, we take pride in our diversity, we hold high expectations for ourselves and our students, and we treat each other with respect and act with integrity. Joseph Le Conte’s racist, sexist beliefs are antithetical to these values.

I am also mindful of the importance of assessing Le Conte’s views in the historical context. As noted above, AR 7310 requires us to review whether Le Conte “has made outstanding contributions to the *community or made contributions of state, national or worldwide significance in light of the Berkeley community's values and contemporary view on history.*”

Le Conte’s views, one hopes, would be repudiated by most people today. Some might excuse his supremacist views and call him “a man of his time”, but we should also point out a Civil War was fought over the question of racial equality, and he took the side that believed that our Union should be torn asunder in order that human beings could continue to be treated as property.

Even after the War, he continued to fight to rationalize white supremacy, and he did so with plenty of opposition at hand. In fact, in the very year that Joseph Le Conte expounded on “Race Problems in the South,” for the Brooklyn Ethical Association, the same group heard Reverend Samuel J. Barrows speak on the **Evolution of the African-American**. Reverend Barrows also held what we might consider to be racist views, though perhaps not white supremacist views. He reported on his visits to the post-Civil War South that former slaves were aspiring and achieving wherever there was an opportunity for education and economic advancement, and that it was most often the whites who stood in their way. He declared that the “white race” was standing in the way of social equality and advancement, and therefore whites needed to evolve as well.

Le Conte was a person of great power and influence, who went out of his way to spread his pernicious views about race and gender, and in doing so, he did real harm. In the words of one Le Conte parent, he not a man “of” his time, he was actually a man “against” his time, when it came to social change. While he had what we might call enlightened views in understanding geological forces, and was able to reconcile Christian faith with scientific theory, when it came time to recognize that social forces were moving finally toward greater racial equality, or when women’s rights came to the fore, he dug in his heels. Thus, while it is no doubt true that Le Conte made important contributions to science, his contributions are overshadowed

by his noxious views, which he expressed and disseminated widely in order to deny others the power and freedom he enjoyed.

Additional Considerations

In addition to considering the contributions of the namesake individual, AR 7310 also includes the option for any information or input that the Superintendent deems appropriate and necessary. The following additional considerations influence my recommendation.

Le Conte Elementary School holds a special place in our district, as the Two-Way Immersion Spanish-English elementary school. BUSD is committed to an inclusive, expansive role of education in ensuring that our students are prepared to participate as informed, engaged citizens of an interconnected world, and the students and staff at Le Conte embody this ideal. While the current families and staff at Le Conte may be transitory, there is a through-line from the values espoused by the current community to those held by recent generations, and we think, many generations to come.

Berkeley of 1892, when the school was named, was in many ways a forward-thinking community, and the Le Conte brothers were part of building an educational institution that would have a key role in developing a more inclusive and more democratic society. However, in 1892, those who were invited to sit at the table to make decisions about our town and our schools were a small and homogeneous group. For example, only men could vote until 1906, when finally women were “allowed” a partial franchise, to vote and run for school board. The first woman, Eleanor Carlisle, was elected to the School Board in 1909, and a few years later a Berkeley public school was finally named for a woman - Frances E. Willard, a temperance and suffrage leader.

We have put together a [brief overview of Berkeley Public Schools history](#) which might be of interest. Most of the names for our schools were selected in a relatively short time frame, 100-125 years ago, when the decisions makers selected heroes for their times. We might agree that some of the selected namesakes still speak to us across time, but we also may be ready to look for unsung heroes, and other ways to inspire and unite our community.

In the late 19th and early 20th century Berkeley was a relatively small town, and about 95% white. The city grew and diversified, especially after World War II, and over time we began to elect a more representative School Board, integrate our schools, and embark on providing a more equitable access to education for all, work that still continues to this day. We have evolved as a community, and I believe the changes are significant enough to warrant a search for a new name for Le Conte School that might carry us into the next century.

Meanwhile, there are still many places and things that still carry the Le Conte name: - Mount LeConte in the Sierra Nevada, Le Conte Hall at the University of Georgia and at UC Berkeley, LeConte College at the University of South Carolina, Le Conte Cascade on the Tuolumne River, Le Conte Avenue in North Berkeley, and indeed the entire Le Conte Neighborhood of Berkeley's Southside. We are not suggesting that all markers must change. We recognize the desire for continuity may be important for some

groups, and it may be particularly challenging for the Le Conte neighborhood to determine how to address both continuity and change if the school changes its name.

In recent national discussions of Confederate monuments, one issue raised has been that of "erasing history" by removing monuments, and a similar objection might be raised to the Le Conte renaming. We want to understand our past, while we look to our future together. In conversations in our community we have had an opportunity to bring history to light. Le Conte is no longer a well-known figure in Berkeley, and discussing the origins of the school name has provided an important educational opportunity, one which we could carry forward into future community conversations. A suggestion has been made that if the Board votes to discontinue the name, if and when the name changes, there should be a plaque that notes the original name of the school, and contains some history of the original name choice as well as the renaming decision to discontinue the Le Conte name and rename the school.

In 2015 the Sierra Club decided to **rename the Le Conte Memorial Lodge in Yosemite** when Joseph Le Conte's racist views became more well known; it is now the Yosemite Conservation Heritage Center. The Sierra Club's reasoning for the name change was that it was an "insult to visitors to retain his name in association with an educational center that is supposed to serve as a place to welcome visitors with open doors." My recommendation to change the name of our elementary school echoes this rationale, and further opens the door to what we hope will be a positive, unifying process that expresses our values and our aspirations for all of the children of Berkeley.

Next Steps If the Board Votes to Discontinue the Le Conte Name

The decision to discontinue a school's name rests exclusively with the School Board. If the Board agrees that the name should be discontinued, the existing name continues as a placeholder, for purposes of reference and school systems, until the Board determines a new name. If a name change process is supported by the board, I would then initiate the further steps, as described in AR 7310, with the goal of having the Board vote on a new name by the end of the 2017-18 school year.

The first step is to form an Advisory Committee to assist in soliciting and reviewing potential new names for the school. If an Advisory Committee is appointed, AR 7310 states that the Committee will organize at least three community meetings. The first would be to announce, explain, and discuss the naming process and timeline. If this recommendation is approved tonight, that first meeting would probably be held in January 2018. The second meeting would probably take place in February, to begin to solicit potential new names, and the third, probably in March, would be designed to receive feedback on potential names. By April we could potentially bring a proposal to the Board for a decision in May, with the potential for implementation for the next school year.

Board Policy 7310 also refers to the involvement of the community in proposing new school names, and I believe that should include students, staff, parents/guardians, and neighbors. My hope and expectation is that if the Board gives direction for a change of name, Advisory Committee members would conduct outreach to a wide

range of constituents in order to maximize participation and provide for an inclusive and thoughtful process that will lead to a school name that will unite and inspire us for at least the next 100 years.

POLICY/CODE:

BUSD Board Policy 7310

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Approve the Recommendation to Discontinue the Name of Le Conte Elementary School.