

BERKELEY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

TO: Board of Education
FROM: Brent Stephens, Ed.D., Superintendent
PRESENTERS: Natasha Beery, Director of BSEP and Community Relations
Grace Kong, Naming Advisory Committee Facilitator
DATE: December 9, 2020
SUBJECT: Recommendation for Renaming Jefferson Elementary School

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Following Board Resolution No. 20-064, and in accordance with Board Policy and AR 7310, the Superintendent's Naming Advisory Committee (NAC) is making a recommendation for a new name for the former Jefferson Elementary School for Board discussion and possible decision.

The Naming Advisory Committee is pleased to recommend that the elementary school formerly known as Jefferson be given the name **Ruth Acty Elementary**.

A Local Hero

Ruth Acty was the first teacher of color in Berkeley Unified School District. This inspiring educator, who dedicated nearly 50 years of her life to teaching students from Kindergarten through Adult School, has been described as "a tenacious, committed, dedicated, caring and loving educator, trailblazer and history maker."¹

Ruth Acty's importance to the history of Berkeley schools has long been recognized, including earlier proposals as an eponym for a school facility. In 1998, when Ruth Acty passed away at the age of 85, the program for her Celebration of Life included many tributes from her former students, and remarks by many community leaders, including Robert L. Haynes, senior curator of the African American Museum and Library² who stated, "Miss Ruth Acty's significance in the history of the Bay Area is unparalleled. She represents the best in excellence, elegance, refinement, commitment, determination, perseverance and persistence. She was a superior mentor and role model for planning and reaching goals, despite the odds." A biography is included in Appendix A, and articles provided by the Berkeley Historical Society for additional insights about her form Appendix B.

¹ Celebrating and Appreciating Miss Ruth Acty: A Model of Excellence, Memorial Program Oct 16 1998.

² The African American Museum and Library in Oakland contains the Ruth Acty papers, a collection of materials that document her life and activities as a teacher and author.

In 2018, as the community of the school formerly known as LeConte Elementary was rediscovering local heroes; while “Sylvia Mendez” was ultimately chosen, the name “Ruth Acty” was the second most popular name, and many in the wider Berkeley community had continued to hope for a way to recognize the importance of Ruth Acty’s excellence, perseverance, and crucial role in blazing a path for teachers of color.

In 2020, with the renaming of Jefferson Elementary, there were seven top names proposed for school learning and community engagement, and the name “Ruth Acty” rose to the top 3 names for every group: students, staff and parent/guardians. A description of the community engagement process is included in Appendix C, and summary of input is included in Appendix D.

Connections to Many Inspiring Stories

During school meetings, classroom discussions, thought exchanges and polls, many community members expressed the desire to lift up the story of a role model, a woman of color who persevered and exemplified excellence, an educator as someone worthy of recognition, and a unique name that is deeply tied to Berkeley history, and the name “Ruth Acty” answered that call.

At the same time, the community engagement process provided a meaningful opportunity to uplift many stories that exemplify core values of equality, excellence, community service, and perseverance. There are powerful intersections among the top seven names that were considered for renaming the school - *Betty Reid Soskin*, *Ruby Bridges*, *Ruth Acty*, *Ruth Bader Ginsburg*, *Maya Angelou*, *Mukwema Ohlone*, and *Yoshiko Uchida*.

For example, Ruth Acty began working in Berkeley in 1943, after initially experiencing discrimination in hiring in 1939 due to her race, at the same time that *Yoshiko Uchida* was experiencing the overt racial discrimination against Japanese Americans that led to the unjust incarceration of her entire Berkeley family, who were sent from Tanforan to Topaz in 1942. During World War II, Ruth Acty worked days as a school teacher, but to make ends meet, she also worked evenings in the Richmond shipyards, which connects her life story to *Betty Reid Soskin*. Along with Betty Reid Soskin, Ruth Acty recognized that “what we remember is based on who is doing the remembering,” as in 1984 she co-produced with Maggie Gee a book called “Looking Back at Berkeley: A Pictorial History of a Diverse City” in which the life and contributions of Black, Asian and Hispanic/Latinx members of the community were highlighted.

Ruth Acty’s career also spanned the period of school integration in the 1960’s, when *Ruby Bridges* was part of the national story. She was an active member of the NAACP

and said, “whatever group was trying to break down segregation, I was a part of it.” She joined the Church of The Fellowship of All Peoples, the nation’s first interracial, intercultural, interfaith church, where she organized the choir. Ruth Acty shared *Maya Angelou’s* passion for the spoken word, theatre and activism. Her stated philosophy that “there will be a way” resonates with *Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s* determination to forge ahead beyond obstacles and fight for justice.

The Committee has heard and discussed many ideas for “carrying the learning forward” about other names that were considered during the renaming engagement process, so that the inspiration and educational opportunities do not end with the selection of a new school name. Please see Appendix E for a list of suggestions. One suggestion, which would require Board approval, is to rename the school meeting room, now simply called the auditorium / cafetorium, “Sequoia Hall” to honor the 2003-2005 effort to rename Jefferson School, and that could be approved tonight along with the school name change. Another suggestion that could eventually require Board approval would be the creation of a mural at the school which reflects all of the top seven names, but there is not yet a detailed proposal for that option. Another consideration is the possibility of further engagement with local tribal representatives about the ways in which indigenous history and presence is reflected in our schools, including in our District curriculum, with the potential for a later naming opportunity.

SUMMARY

The name Ruth Acty Elementary School uplifts an enduring, inspiring and meaningful local story, reflects community values, adds the name of an educator and another woman of color to our family of school names, and is strongly supported by school staff, students and families.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

1. Board approve the recommendation of the name “Ruth Acty Elementary School”
2. Board approve the recommendation of the name “Sequoia Hall” for the auditorium
3. Staff continue engagement with tribal representatives regarding indigenous representation in curriculum and our schools

FISCAL IMPACT

Estimated cost of new school signage is \$25,000. Other costs include staff time for systems implementation, as described in Appendix F.

ATTACHMENTS

Appendix A: Ruth Acty Biography

Appendix B: Berkeley Historical Society Articles

Appendix C: Learning About Top Seven Names
Appendix D: Summary of Community Input
Appendix E: Carrying the Learning Forward
Appendix F: Name Change Implementation Steps