



Association of Oldest Inhabitants of The District of Columbia

Established Dec. 7, 1865 – Celebrating our 161th year!



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VIA E-Mail Submission

Chairman Phil Mendelson

Council of the District of Columbia

Committee of the Whole

1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20004

January 26, 2026

Re: Gardner Bishop Elementary School Redesignation Act of 2025 (Bill 26-0364)

Dear Chairman Mendelson:

I write on behalf of the Association of Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia (AOI) to wholeheartedly support the D.C. Council’s adoption of the Gardner Bishop Elementary School Redesignation Act of 2025 (Bill 26-0364), We urge the Council to adopt this legislation to honor an individual who better reflects the values of the students, teachers, parents, and the entire community of the school located at Robert Brent Elementary. As I explain fully below, Robert Brent was an enslaver and proponent of restrictive “Black Codes.” D.C. civil rights activist Gardner Bishop is an inspiring choice for the new name of the school, and the redesignation is consistent with earlier precedent by the D.C. Council.

I. The Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of D.C.

The Association of Oldest Inhabitants. of D.C. was founded in 1865 and is D.C.’s oldest historical organization. AOI is dedicated to preserving and celebrating D.C.’s unique heritage. Among its many recent accomplishments over its 161 years are the successful advocacy of reopening of five of L’Enfant’s original streets, the preservation of D.C.’s historic records, the retention of the D.C. World War I memorial, and the preservation of the Smithsonian’s Haupt Garden. For the Association’s making an “unequaled difference over the years,” D.C.’s Committee of 100 gave AOI a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2024.

II. Robert Brent was an Enslaver and Proponent of Restrictive “Black Codes”

The school is currently named for the first Mayor of the District of Columbia, Robert Brent (1764-1819). Mr. Brent has already been identified in Mayor Bowser’s 2020 FACES working group report as a “person [whose name] is inconsistent with D.C. values and in some way encouraged the oppression of African Americans and other communities of color or contributed to our long history of systemic racism.” See D.C. Facilities and Commemorative Expressions (DCFACES) Working Group Report at p. 5 (August 31, 2020).



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“Division 2” Black school, in the Kingman Park neighborhood of Northeast DC. Built in 1932 to educate up to 783 students, by 1947 when Judine enrolled, the school was bursting with 1,727 students, more than double its capacity. The school board responded to this severe overcrowding by mandating a policy of staggered shifts, in which Black students received only four and a half hours of instruction per day, well below the school board’s standard of six hours per day. At the same time, only a mile away, white students attended the increasingly empty Eliot Hine Junior High, which had vacant classrooms, underused space, and room for 200 more students. *Chocolate City* at 305-06.

Mr. Bishop responded by leading parents to organize the Browne Parent Group for Equality of Educational Opportunities, which submitted a petition signed by more than 160 parents to the school board, announcing “a bold act of civil disobedience: they would not send their children to school until the school board provided “adequate relief from part-time schooling.” *Chocolate City* at 307. They then led a walkout from the school in December 1947, that stretched into a two-month boycott. The walkout and boycott attracted considerable media and Congressional attention, with Mr. Bishop serving as the eminently quotable spokesperson of the group. Id.

To assist the boycott with legal action, Mr. Bishop and other leaders of the parent group turned to Charles Hamilton Houston, the legal giant at the center of the NAACP’s multipronged assault on segregation in the District. What followed over the next six years was tenacious action by Mr. Bishop – leading grassroots activists – and the NAACP lawyers – taking multiple legal actions on behalf of individual Black students and parents, that culminated in the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case of *Bolling v. Sharpe*, 347 U.S. 497 (1954), that ended legal segregation in D.C. schools. See generally, *Chocolate City* at 308-313.

IV. Redesignation as Gardner Bishop Elementary School is Consistent with Recent Action by the D.C. Council

The D.C. Council has recently demonstrated its willingness to respond to community-led action to redesignate schools to honor individuals who better reflect the values of the students, teachers, parents, and the entire D.C. community. See, for example, Lawrence E. Boone Elementary School Designation Emergency Act of 2018 (B22-0770) (to remove Benjamin Orr, former D.C. Mayor and enslaver, in favor of beloved 20-year principal Lawrence E. Boone); Shirley Chisholm Elementary School Redesignation Emergency Act of 2024 (B25-0646)(to remove John Tyler, U.S. President, enslaver, and pro-slavery advocate, in favor of U.S. Representative and presidential candidate Shirley Chisholm); and Jackson-Reed High School Redesignation Act of 2021 (B24-0286) to remove Woodrow Wilson, U.S. President, segregationist-in-chief, and Ku Klux Klan supporter, in favor of legendary D.C. Black educators Edna Jackson and Vincent Reed). In this last example, the D.C. Council conducted extensive proceedings, including a public hearing and a public roundtable, and filed a 37-page report by the Committee of the Whole, in which a useful standard was enunciated:

When we name schools in the District, it is an opportunity to honor someone or something, or an opportunity to inspire. More broadly, the name of a public building, space, or street should: (1) be one that the community supports; (2) honors a person, event, or place for a clearly articulated reason, and (3) be inspirational, such as to the students in a school. Report on Bill 24-286 (December 7, 2021), at p. 2.

As is amply demonstrated by the record before the Committee on this Bill, all three criteria are met here. We especially applaud the school community for conducting such a robust campaign to decide a new name was needed, and to arrive at such an inspiring new name. To quote Brent fourth-grader Billy Schutte-Pratt, who told the Council he wants his school to highlight someone people can be broad of: “they won’t think of a racist White guy,” Billy said. “They’ll think of a parent who saw a problem and – instead of accepting it, thinking there was nothing to be done – he took action, he helped



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others.” “D.C. May Rename School That Honors City’s First Mayor, a Proponent of Slavery,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 15, 2025. Inspiring indeed. The new Gardner Bishop name will create opportunities for teaching and learning for generations to come.

V. Conclusion

For all of these reasons, AOI agrees that the Brent Elementary School community has been wholly justified in their efforts to seek a new name for their school. The process followed by the school community to arrive at a new name is especially commendable. As is fully outlined in the testimony submitted by the parents, teachers and students, the process followed was robust, and marked by ample opportunities for teaching and learning about possible candidates. AOI fully endorses the choice of D.C. civil rights activist Gardner Bishop, and encourages the D.C. Council to vote to adopt the bill.

Respectfully submitted,
Dr. Cindy Gueli
President, Association of Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia