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**San Diego caught up in debate over Confederate school names
National movement following church shooting forcing schools to
rethink Confederate names**

By Maureen Magee, 5:30pm, July 10th, 2015



Robert E. Lee Elementary School in San Diego is among many nationwide reconsidering Confederate names following a shooting that left nine dead at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. — *Maureen Magee*

From Robert E. Lee Elementary School in San Diego to Yale University's Calhoun College, education institutions nationwide have been forced to rethink their ties to the Confederacy this summer.

The call to rename schools has moved beyond the more than 180 American campuses named for Confederate Civil War leaders to include those with names or mascots with links to slavery or racism.

Just this week, David Wark Griffith Middle School in East Los Angeles became the latest Southern California school to come under fire since its namesake — the early movie pioneer more commonly known as D.W. Griffith — made “The Birth of a Nation,” a 1915 Civil War film that celebrates the Ku Klux Klan.

The movement comes in the wake of a shooting that left nine dead at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, last month. The white suspect has been documented making racism comments, and wrapping himself in a Confederate flag.

The church killings quickly ignited a national debate over government institutions that fly the Confederate flag and businesses that sell merchandise bearing the Dixie image. South Carolina permanently removed the controversial flag from its own state Capital on Friday.

But when it comes to school names and mascots, some are reluctant to hastily drop them because they are near and dear to generations of alums.

Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez, D-San Diego, asked the San Diego Unified School District to change the name of Robert E. Lee Elementary School several months ago at the request of constituents.

Since then, a bill has been introduced to the Legislature that would ban the naming of schools and roads statewide after confederate leaders. Senate Bill 539, carried by Sen. Steve Glazer, D-Orinda, would require that schools are renamed by January 2017.

Reaction has been mixed in San Diego, with former Lee Elementary students from decades ago urging the district to preserve the name. Others have offered support for a speedy change.

“In some ways, historically, we are a little late with this. I think we can all agree there has got to be another name for the school that better reflects the community,” said Gonzalez, who is among several co-authors of the legislation. “What we’ve found is that most people didn’t even know who the school was named for.”

San Diego Unified and Gonzalez plan to wait until school resumes in September before taking up the issue to make sure students, teachers and parents have a voice in the conversation.

Benjamin Lopez, whose children and grandchildren attended Lee, is keenly interested in education and civic issues. But renaming the school is not a concern for him.

“Will renaming the school make it a better school? Will it make the students do better? Will it stop crime and drugs in the neighborhood? Those are the issues I care about,” said Lopez, who lives across the street from Lee Elementary School.

Kilian Barrios, a Lee alum, disagrees with his grandfather on this issue. “I remember back when I was young, I thought, why is my school named after a Confederate guy,” said Barrios. “I think it’s time for a change. The world has changed.”

Local leaders want San Diego Unified to speed up its lengthy school renaming policy so Robert E. Lee could be scrubbed from the campus this fall.

Board President Marne Foster hopes to lead that charge.

“This is an opportunity to take the whole community through this process of change,” Foster said. “The fact that there is legislation might help us move it along more quickly.”

While the bill targets schools, the breath of its language has raised questions up and down the state. The measure states, “a name associated with the Confederate States of America shall not be used to name state or local property.”

Residents of Fort Bragg have wondered what the legislation would mean for their small Northern California coastal city. A pre-Civil War military outpost there was named after Army officer Braxton Bragg, who later became a Confederate general. The city kept the name after the army left.

Fort Bragg City Hall has received assurances that city names would be protected, according to the Sacramento Bee. The mayor also told the Bee the city name wasn’t affiliated with the Confederacy because it was adopted before Bragg became a rebel general.

The Long Beach school board is set to take up the name of its Robert E. Lee School later this month. Other districts throughout the country have already discussed renaming schools, mascots, and athletic teams — often igniting community debates over the issue.

These growing conflicts over history, heritage and symbolism can be delicate to navigate, said Ashley Virtue, director of external relations for the National Conflict Resolution Center, a nonprofit based in San Diego.

“It’s important to identify the stakeholders in these issues, and to not assume that you know the values of each side,” Virtue said. “Each side really holds the rightness of its own perspective so highly and it finds the other side kind of threatening.”

Assemblywoman and former San Diego school board President Shirley Weber, D-San Diego, supports the effort to rename the school, which opened in 1959 in Paradise Hills, now a diverse neighborhood where 3 percent of students are white.

“It’s appropriate that a school should be named for someone who is inclusive because we live in a nation that is inclusive,” Weber said.

Although Gonzalez said “the community will do what the community will do” with the issue, she has a suggestion: Shirley Weber Elementary School — an idea that Weber herself laughed off on Friday.

San Diego’s Lee Elementary is among 78 schools nationwide that pay tribute to Robert E. Lee, the often-romanticized Civil War general who went on to become president of Washington University, which was renamed Washington and Lee University after he died.

Debates about school names are underway across the country — including at Stonewall Jackson Middle School in Charleston, W.Va., and J.E.B. Stuart High School in Fairfax County, Va.

At Yale, some students have rallied around an effort to rename Calhoun College, one of 12 residential colleges at the university. The college is named for John C. Calhoun, a 1804 Yale graduate and the seventh U.S. vice president who was also a vocal supporter of slavery.

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