

Officials Grappling with Confederate Names on Public Schools

According to the SPLC, there are at least 109 public schools named after Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis or other Confederate icons in the United States

By Jesse J. Holland
Associated Press

With a new school year dawning, education officials are grappling with whether to remove the names, images and statues of Confederate figures from public schools — especially since some are now filled with students of color.

The violence at a white nationalist rally over a Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville, Virginia, is giving school officials a new reason to reconsider whether it's appropriate for more than 100 schools to be named after Confederate generals and politicians from the Old South.

"It does not make sense to have schools named after individuals who were directly connected to that dark past, and force kids in Dallas, a majority minority population, to walk into these schools every day and have to face this past every single day," said Miguel Solis, former board president and current board member of the Dallas Independent School District.

Dallas, along with other cities, began moving to change Confederate names and imagery after white nationalist and Confederate enthusiast Dylann Roof murdered nine black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015.

But the reviews gained momentum after the Aug. 12 protest by white supremacists in Charlottesville, which left one counter-protester dead.

"We don't tolerate hate or discrimination of any form, and we are committed to providing an ed-

ucational environment where all students can feel safe and welcomed at school," said Superintendent Aurora Lora in Oklahoma City, where there are four schools named after Confederate generals.

"We want to think about the people our buildings are named after and whether they represent the values we as a district have at this time," Lora said.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, there are at least 109 public schools named after Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis or other Confederate icons in the

history needs to be preserved, or they align the philosophy of the Confederacy or neo-Nazis."

The South has the majority of Confederate-named public schools in the country.

In Falls Church, Virginia, the school board has voted to rename J.E.B. Stuart High School. Stuart was a slaveholding Confederate general who was mortally wounded in an 1864 battle. In Montgomery, Alabama, the school board is looking at moving Lee's statue from the front of majority-black Robert E. Lee High School.

In Arlington, Virginia,

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United States. Of those, "27 have student populations that are majority African-American, and 10 have African-American populations of over 90 percent," according to the SPLC's 2016 report.

Several school names were changed, or new schools were built and named after Confederates "during the era of white resistance to equality," the SPLC report said.

Solis said he has support for his effort to change school names in Dallas, but "that's not to say that there haven't been people who have been very upset because they believe either the

Robert E. Lee's hometown, there is a move now to rename Washington-Lee High School. "It is time to talk about the values these names reflect and the messages we are sending to our children," Barbara Kanninen, Arlington school board chair, said in a statement.

At some schools, the push for change starts with the students. In Greenville, South Carolina, student Asha Marie started a Change.org petition to rename Wade Hampton High School. Hampton was a Confederate cavalry commander during the Civil War and was later elected



In this Aug. 21, 2017 file photo, a pedestal wrapped in plastic that had held a statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee which was removed from the University of Texas campus in Austin, Texas. With a new school year dawning, education officials around the nation are grappling with whether to remove the names, images and statues of Confederate figures from public schools, some of whom are now filled with students of color who could be descendants of those whom the South fought to keep in slavery.

governor of South Carolina and criticized the Reconstruction era which put black leaders in political office.

"Racism, bigotry, and a blatant lack of patriotism," she wrote in her petition. "These are not values of South Carolinians and should not continue to be enshrined in a place of learning."

But another student, Austin Ritter, started a counterpetition to keep the name. "There is no need to change the school's name," Ritter wrote. "Changing the name of this school will

also change its history. It will change everything the school has stood for. Everything the school has done."

At others, alumni and outsiders are the ones sounding the call.

The debate over the Stuart name change in Falls Church kicked off in earnest in 2015 when actress Julianne Moore, who attended Stuart in the '70s, and Hollywood producer Bruce Cohen, a Stuart alumnus, launched a petition demanding the name change. In Alabama, it was a community activist

who suggested moving the Lee statue out from in front of Robert E. Lee High School.

Changing a school's name is not cheap. In Oklahoma City, Lora said it could be \$50,000 or more to change signage, letterhead, business cards and more for each school; Other school officials have quoted higher and lower figures.

"You can make any excuse you want to try and stop something like this and dollars are what a lot of people lead with," said Solis, who called it a "hol-low argument."

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