



City of Philadelphia

City Council
Chief Clerk's Office
402 City Hall
Philadelphia, PA 19107

Legislation Text

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Honoring and recognizing the dedicated service of Deborah Wei, whose steadfast championship and work on behalf of the Philadelphia Chinatown and Asian American communities has inspired a new generation of community advocates and preserved Philadelphia's Chinatown as a vibrant, national cultural icon.

WHEREAS, Deborah Wei was born on May 25, 1957, in Norwich NY and later moved with her family to Upper Darby; and

WHEREAS, During college, Wei joined VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) to assist the Philadelphia Council of Neighborhood Organizations working both in Chinatown and North Philadelphia investigating the tax delinquency of predatory landlords; and

WHEREAS, As a student, Wei also organized in coalition to oppose the plaintiff of the *Bakke v University of California* case, which sought to challenge affirmative action; and

WHEREAS, During college, Wei provided leadership in the student movement-demanding her university's divestment from businesses profiting from apartheid South Africa; and

WHEREAS, After returning from a 2 year stint in Hong Kong, Wei returned to Philadelphia and worked as an organizer in the Southeast Asian community with the Fellowship Commission; and

WHEREAS, In 1982, Wei began teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages at the School District of Philadelphia for 10 years; and

WHEREAS, In 1985, Wei helped found Asian Americans United (AAU), one of the oldest Asian Pacific Islander based organizations in Philadelphia, which has championed the rights of and inspired new leadership from Philadelphians of Asian descent to challenge oppression; and

WHEREAS, In 1985, Wei worked with the Education Law Center in filing a transformational class action suit, *YS v. School District of Philadelphia*, on behalf of Philadelphia's 6,800 Asian students, which is widely believed to be the first class action filed against a school district on behalf of Asian students since *Lau v. Nichols* in 1974, and resulted in a settlement that requires district officials to contact all Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Asians of school age who dropped out before graduating to inform them that they have the right to return to a regular school or enroll in an adult-education course, requires both oral and written communications to parents be in a language they understand, establishes a new staff position overseeing the education of LEP students, establishes an advisory committee, which Wei was appointed to, and mandated a remedial plan to address the instructional needs of Asian LEP students, including assessment and counseling in their native language and a revised curriculum for the district's ESL program; and

WHEREAS, Wei, through her work on the advisory committee, helped redefine the School District of Philadelphia's ESOL curriculum, create the position of bilingual counseling assistant to assist families, and hire additional Asian bilingual teachers; and

WHEREAS, From 1992 - 2005, Wei shaped the School District of Philadelphia's Asian Pacific American Studies curriculum, contributed to expanding ethnic studies and social justice curriculum, and returned to her role there as a curriculum specialist in 2021; and

WHEREAS, From 1982-1986, Wei worked for the right to decent housing in West Philadelphia, organizing non English speaking newly arrived refugee tenants in Admiral Court to unite and escrow rent in order to take over the needed repairs in a building previously declared unfit for human habitation; and

WHEREAS, In 1986, Wei helped build AAU's first Youth Leadership Summer Program, which employed high school and college students to run a summer school for Southeast Asian children lacking childcare during the daytime; and

WHEREAS, In 1989, Wei helped AAU's earliest organized campaigns against anti-Asian violence in response to the hate crime murder of Heng Lim, a Cambodian American man, who was killed in front of his family by a man calling him "f**king Chinese" and whose case was mishandled by law enforcement; and

WHEREAS, In 1991, Wei built a movement to defend 5 of her students following the killing of a white youth during a playground fight between white power boys and Asians in Southwest Philadelphia, working with AAU for fair treatment and against the deportation of the defendants; and

WHEREAS, In 1992, Wei successfully organized with Chinatown parents to win a school bus route for Chinatown children; and

WHEREAS, Wei is a published author of 3 books, "*In My Heart, I am a Dancer*" (1997), which features Philadelphia area Cambodian dancer Chamroeun Yin, "*Resistance in Paradise*" (1998), a collection of resources about US military involvement in the Caribbean and Oceania which won the 1999 Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Award, and "*Walking on Solid Ground*" (2004), which features cultural traditions alive in Philadelphia's Chinatown and won a 2004 Aesop Accolade award; and

WHEREAS, In 1995, Wei founded Chinatown's annual Mid Autumn Festival in conjunction with AAU and Chinatown community members; and

WHEREAS, In 2000, Wei successfully helped lead community organizing efforts to save Chinatown from a proposed baseball stadium; and

WHEREAS, In 2005, Wei founded the Folk Arts Cultural Treasures Charter School, Philadelphia's only primary school focusing on the needs and education of immigrant students and families, in conjunction with Asian Americans United and the Philadelphia Folklore Project, as well as served as the first principal and executive director until 2010; and

WHEREAS, In 2006, Wei supported trafficked Chinese youth in a case that led to a State Department Investigation and prosecution of a person charged with modern day slavery; and

WHEREAS, In 2008, Wei helped successfully lead Chinatown community organizing against a casino proposal by Foxwoods; and

WHEREAS, In 2009, Wei supported Asian American South Philadelphia High School students in their fight

against anti-Asian violence, which led to a landmark case brought by the Department of Justice; and

WHEREAS, From 2010 to 2013, Wei served as a Director and Deputy Chief Academic Officer for the Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs in the School District of Philadelphia; and

WHEREAS, From 2013 to 2016, Wei served as the Director of the Elementary School at the American Embassy School in New Delhi; and

WHEREAS, From 2016 to 2020, Wei served as the Director of the Elementary School at the Crossroads School for Arts and Sciences in Santa Monica, CA; and

WHEREAS, From 2020 to 2021, Wei worked for the Zinn Education Project as a national organizer supporting teachers in states where anti-CRT legislation was passed; and

WHEREAS, In 2022, Wei continues her legacy as a champion of the Philadelphia Chinatown community, now leading their fight for survival against the threat of a basketball arena; therefore be it

RESOLVED, THAT THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, honors and recognizes the dedicated service of Deborah Wei, whose steadfast championship and work on behalf of the Philadelphia Chinatown and Asian American communities has inspired a new generation of community advocates and preserved Philadelphia Chinatown as a vibrant, national cultural icon; and be it

FURTHER RESOLVED, That an Engrossed copy of this resolution be presented to Deborah Wei and her loving spouse, Tze Ming Chau, as an expression of the sincere respect and admiration of this legislative body.