

Legislation Text

File #: 170973, **Version:** 0

Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the November 17, 1967 Citywide Black Student Walkout, and honoring the continuing tradition of youth organizing and activism around education equity and racial justice in the City of Philadelphia.

WHEREAS, The Black Power Movement marked a period in which cross-generational activists in the City of Philadelphia organized mass protests and boycotts in order to speak truth to power; and

WHEREAS, In 1967, Black students joined and expanded the growing Black Power Movement by writing a student bill of rights and demanding community control of their public schools; and

WHEREAS, Black students decried the African American student dropout rate, and called for a greater representation of African Americans in the teaching force, administration, and governance of their schools as well as the teaching of African American History; and

WHEREAS, School administrators at a number of high schools refused to recognize Black student unions as legitimate clubs; students sought recognition of these unions in order to strengthen their voice and role in school policies and governance; and

WHEREAS, Students who protested racial injustice and school segregation demanded the right to refuse to salute the United States flag or say the pledge of allegiance without penalty, greater representation of Black students in union-sponsored apprenticeship programs, the freedom to express themselves through wearing African clothes and jewelry, and the use of African names; and

WHEREAS, Walter Palmer of the Black Peoples Unity Movement and William Mathis of the Philadelphia Chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality provided youth activists with training and resources to develop an organizing strategy and create a student bill of rights; and

WHEREAS, Youth organizations such as the Student Action Committee and the Central Coordinating Committee dedicated significant time, energy, and spirit to create demands around issues of representation, self-determination, and diversity in their schools. They worked tirelessly for three years to develop an action plan that would show the Board of Education that their campaign was rooted in an approach to social justice that centered student needs for education to be culturally-relevant and meaningful. These students were critical of schools as they were, and envisioned them as they could be; and

WHEREAS, With strategy and materials in place, student activists led a series of organized student walkouts throughout October and November 1967. The first demonstration occurred on October 26, when 300 Gratz High School students exited during lunchtime to rally outside of the school, holding signs that read “The School Board Doesn’t Serve the Black Community” and “We Need an Independent School Board”. Three hundred students at Bok Technical High School followed suit. District officials referred to the student organizing as “real social studies in action”; and

WHEREAS, These demonstrations culminated on Friday, November 17, 1967, with the walkout and nonviolent gathering of over 3,500 Black student protesters from South Philadelphia, William Penn, Gratz, Germantown, Kensington, Bartram, Bok, West Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin, and Edison High Schools, amongst others. Hundreds of elementary and middle school students also walked out of their schools to show solidarity with high school student protestors; and

WHEREAS, Student activists marched from their schools to School District of Philadelphia Headquarters at 21st Street and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, chanting “Black Studies Now!” and “more Black Power in the school system!” Superintendent Mark Shedd met with march leaders upon their arrival to acknowledge demands and attempt to address student grievances. Student leaders yelled updates from the windows of the School District Building, eventually declaring that the Superintendent and school board officials had agreed to almost all of their demands; and

WHEREAS, Walter Palmer described the mood of the walkouts and gathering as one of “hope, energy, and possibility that must never be forgotten” and the *Evening Bulletin* described the atmosphere as more like “a picnic” than a demonstration; and

WHEREAS, While a plainclothes civil disobedience squad was present for much of the gathering, as more Black students gathered outside of School District Headquarters, Police Commissioner Frank Rizzo ordered 111 newly-sworn-in police sergeants in full riot gear to control the crowd of students. When police attempted to arrest a student who ran across a series of parked cars, police violence escalated starting with the beating of a young woman and an Episcopal Priest who sought to protect protesters from police violence; and

WHEREAS, Officers charged at student activists with their clubs drawn, shouting racial epithets and launching tear gas. Some students held their ground, as some leaders called for students to “fight back”!, and

WHEREAS, In all, 42 students and 15 adults were arrested, while 30 were treated for injuries, among them some of Philadelphia’s most significant civil rights leaders. Twelve police officers and 27 bystanders were also hospitalized; and

WHEREAS, Activists, school district employees, and bystanders said they broke down in tears witnessing the violence against the youth. School Board President and former Mayor Richardson Dilworth described the events in this way: “Things were under control until Commissioner Rizzo, without our request, saw fit to loose a couple of hundred men, swinging clubs and beating children”; and

WHEREAS, The School District of Philadelphia responded to the protest by meeting with students and staff from predominantly Black schools and discussing means of quelling racial tension and improving teaching practices. Schools established community-parent-student committees in predominantly African American high schools to diversify the curriculum and better serve African American students, and provided space and resources for Black student unions to meet. The School District also passed a resolution in 1968, spurring professional development for the teaching of African Heritage and African American History; and

WHEREAS, The November 17, 1967, student protest inspired a generation of Black student and youth activists to continue to work for Black Power, racial justice and inclusion in Philadelphia; and

WHEREAS, The legacy of this walkout catalyzed a wave of community and political activity in 1968, including the establishment of the Council of Organizations on Philadelphia Police Accountability and Responsibility (COPPAR), the Black Coalition, the Philadelphia Chapter of the Black Panther Party, and the

Black Political Forum, and launched the careers of ground-breaking Philadelphia politicians Hardy Williams, David Richardson and Wilson Goode; and

WHEREAS, In 2005, the School Reform Commission Chairperson, under the direction of Commissioner Sandra Dungee Glenn, honored the determination of student protests by unanimously approving a district-wide mandated course in African American History. The SRC recognized “that the goal of the 1968 resolution [had] not been fully realized, and that the concerns related to academic achievement addressed by this resolution [remained] a concern in 2005, and in an effort to close the largest academic achievement gap in the District”, the School District of Philadelphia became the first--and only--school system in the nation to require each of its students to complete a course in African American History; and

WHEREAS, The 1967 Citywide Black Student Walkout remains a key event in the vibrant, ever-growing history of youth activism in the City of Philadelphia over the past half century; and

WHEREAS, Philadelphia’s youth activists -led by Black, Brown, and Immigrant youth of color- continue to lead the call for education equity and racial justice in their schools and in our City, including the sit-in during the state takeover of the Philadelphia public schools, walkouts to decry school budget cuts, and immigrant students who boycotted and won a federal civil rights settlement around racial harassment at their school. They demand a more racially diverse teaching force, democratic governance, an end to the school-to-prison pipeline, fairer school discipline practices, clean water access in schools, a student complaints process, and other changes that advance racial equity in Philadelphia schools and beyond; and

WHEREAS, Philadelphia’s youth organizing movements, including Philadelphia Student Union, Youth United for Change, Asian Americans United, VietLead, and many others continue the activist tradition, broadening the work into deeply intersectional organizing, which has earned them national recognition for their work despite too few resources supporting youth leadership programs; and

WHEREAS, In a time when too many talk about youth as tomorrow’s leaders, these organizations build youth leaders for today; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, THAT THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, Commemorates the 50th Anniversary of the November 17, 1967 Citywide Black Student Walkout, and honors the continuing tradition of student organizing and activism around education equity and racial justice in the City of Philadelphia.