## History of the ‘Life of Washington’ Mural

### Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

- **What is the “Life of Washington” mural at George Washington High School?**
- **What is the history of people expressing concerns about the mural?**
- **How is SFUSD responding to these concerns?**
- **What was the recommendation of the Reflection and Action Working Group?**
- **What is planned for the mural now?**
- **Why isn’t SFUSD moving the mural to another location?**
- **The mural is a piece of art with historical significance. Why does District leadership plan to paint over it or remove it from view?**
- **Shouldn’t our schools be teaching the history portrayed in this mural?**

### Table

<table>
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<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tr>
<td>What is the “Life of Washington” mural at George Washington High School?</td>
<td>The “Life of Washington” mural was created by Victor Arnautoff in 1935 as part of the Works Progress Administration. Among other things, the mural depicts enslaved Africans working in cotton fields on George Washington’s Mount Vernon estate and white settlers stepping over the body of a dead Native American. The mural exists in a central hallway at George Washington High School and covers 1,600 square feet of the school walls and at places is over 15 feet high.</td>
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<td>What is the history of community members expressing concerns about the “Life of Washington” mural at George Washington High School?</td>
<td>African American and Indigenous students at Washington High have been telling SFUSD leaders for decades that seeing these images daily reinforces stereotypes and only certain narratives, causes stress and doesn’t help them learn. In the 1960s Washington High School's Black Student Union organized to have the mural removed. They protested the mural's depiction of enslaved Africans shucking corn, picking cotton, and loading barges as servile and humiliating. The Black Panthers joined the struggle. In response, in 1974 the school district installed new murals adjacent to the main lobby called “Multi-Ethnic Heritage” painted by the artist Dewey Crumpler.</td>
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Native American students and families have also pushed for the mural's removal as it reinforces stereotypes and traumatizes students. In 2018 the SFUSD Indian Education Program in their annual report listed removing the racially insensitive murals at Washington HS as one of their top priorities.

### How is SFUSD responding to these concerns now?

SFUSD convened a “Reflection and Action Working Group” that was comprised of leaders of the Indigenous and African American community, students, school representatives, district representatives, local artists and historians. The group held four public meetings between December 2018 and February 2019 to receive input, consider options for the future of the mural, and reflect on the intention and impact of the mural. Agenda items included a history of the mural, a history of Native American stereotypes, and an exploration of the best options for addressing the damage caused by the murals.

### What was the recommendation of the Reflection and Action Working Group?

At its conclusion, the majority of group members recommended that the “Life of Washington” mural be archived and removed. The majority of the group expressed that the mural does not reflect SFUSD's values and the main reason to keep the mural up is focused on the legacy of the artist, rather than the experience of the students.

The committee recommended to digitally archive the murals and paint over them. This recommendation has been endorsed by several groups and elected officials including: Richmond District Democratic Club, Teachers for Social Justice, Chinese Progressive Association, Coleman Advocates, SF Families Union, SF Rising, Showing Up For Racial Justice - SF (SURJ-SF), and Supervisor Shamann Walton.

### What is planned for the mural now?

The District facilities team researched options and on June 18, 2019, at the Committee of the Whole, presented options (including cost estimates) for ways to remove the mural from view to the Board of Education.

On June 25, 2019, the Board of Education voted unanimously to remove the mural from public view. The Board directed staff to
develop a project, for the purposes of a CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) review, that removes the mural from public view by painting over it, or, if the plan to paint over it would result in undue delay, remove from view using solid panels. View public comment and Board discussion [here](#).

Over the summer the staff is doing a deeper analysis around the timeline for painting over the mural and will report back in the fall once the Board reconvenes.

| Why isn’t SFUSD moving the mural to another location? | The mural is a fresco, which means it was directly painted onto plaster. Moving the mural would have structural implications for the building. |
| Why does District leadership plan to paint over the mural or remove it from view? | This artwork is located inside a public high school where children assigned to the school must attend by law. They do not choose to view it as a museum-going public would. District leaders agree that students who have suffered from historical trauma should not be forced to view a mural that they feel is demeaning to their ancestors and their community. The mural will be digitally archived. |
| Shouldn’t our schools be teaching the history portrayed in this mural? | SFUSD teaches the history of slavery, George Washington and Native American genocide, all topics included in the mural that some say should remain in view for the sake of students’ learning. SFUSD also teaches about the many contributions made by African American and Native American people, a perspective not shown in the mural. |

Hear more from the SF Board of Education regarding the murals: Read President Stevon Cook’s [article](#) and Board Commissioner Alison Collins’ [article](#).