

National Coalition Against Censorship

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NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association
American Association of
School Administrators
American Association of
University Professors
American Association of
University Women
American Booksellers Foundation
for Free Expression
American Civil Liberties Union
American Ethical Union
American Federation of Teachers
American Federation of Television
& Radio Artists
American Jewish Committee
American Jewish Congress
American Library Association
American Literary Translators
Association
American Orthopsychiatric Association
American Society of Journalists
& Authors
Americans United for Separation of
Church & State
Association of American Publishers
Authors Guild Foundation
Catholics For a Free Choice
Children's Literature Association
College Art Association
Directors Guild of America
First Amendment Lawyers Association
International Reading Association
Lambda Legal Defense &
Education Fund
Modern Language Association
National Communication Association
National Council for the Social Studies
National Council of the Churches
of Christ
National Council of Jewish Women
National Council of Teachers of English
National Education Association
Office of Communication,
United Church of Christ
PEN American Center
People for the American Way
Planned Parenthood Federation
of America
Screen Actors Guild
Sexuality Information & Education
Council of the U.S.
Society of Children's Book Writers
& Illustrators
Student Press Law Center
The Creative Coalition
The Newspaper Guild/CWA
Union for Reform Judaism
Union of Democratic Intellectuals
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Methodist Communications,
United Methodist Church
Women's American ORT
Writers Guild of America, East
Writers Guild of America, West

April 4, 2007

Dear Superintendent Gary Richards,

We write to express concern about Principal Canty's decision to ban the performance of the student play, *Voices in Conflict*, at Wilton High School. We understand that the production has been stopped due to questions about "political balance" and context, and because you are concerned that "the play can be upsetting to our student, parent, and community audience." As expressed in your recent statement, the school objects to the students' use of media sources and personal letters and the fact that the students themselves play the roles of the soldiers whose lives they aim to portray.

The decision to "extend the educational dialogue" appears reasonable but is suspect if the purpose or effect of the process is to suppress students' views. Indeed, the very attempt to "work with the students to complete a script that fully addresses [your] concerns" reveals an intent to control content, presumably to create a production that arouses no controversy.

However, as the Supreme Court has observed on many occasions, "public educators must accommodate some student expression even if it offends them or offers views or values that contradict those the school wishes to inculcate." (*Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier*, 1989). While school officials have considerable discretion in controlling school-sponsored activity, there are limits when it comes to suppressing non-disruptive political expression, as the Supreme Court recognized nearly 40 years ago in upholding the right of students to wear black armbands to protest the Vietnam war – a view that was at the time highly controversial. (*Tinker v. Des Moines School District*, 1969.)

Moreover, taking control over the student production is questionable educationally, and as a matter of basic fairness. *Voices in Conflict* is the result of a documentary theatre project that was approved at the outset as a valid part of the curriculum. The students proceeded under the supervision of a qualified theatre arts teacher and produced an original work that is a creative interpretation of complex and sensitive issues.

The dramatization of existing “found text” from various media, books and letters is a practice standard among documentary theatre creators. Plays such as *The Laramie Project*, *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, *The Exonerated* and *Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom* have all taken text from real interviews, letters, and emails and dramatized them to critical acclaim. In all these cases, much like with documentary filmmaking, the creators have cut and edited this text to create a dramatic narrative and a point of view.

Likewise, it is customary for documentary theatre performers to act out the text as characters. The idea that student performers should appear as “readers” instead of “directly acting the part of the soldiers” is both detrimental to the educational purpose of writing and performing an original work and inconsistent with the very nature of theatre itself. Requiring students to merely read texts aloud, without acting in character, compromises the dramatic integrity of the production.

Furthermore, presenting this material in a dramatic context provides students with an engaging, educational experience. By studying and portraying characters, students learn to explore and embody perspectives and life experiences outside of their own. For an audience, productions of this nature can make the material more potent and vivid. At its best, theatre deeply moves audiences to think about the complexities of human experience.

It is true that some of the material addressed in the play may be sensitive to some viewers, and you are rightly concerned about addressing their possible discomfort. But this is not an unusual consideration in theatrical productions, and is normally addressed by a disclaimer in the playbill, a sign at the box office, or an announcement at the production warning viewers of the sensitive nature of the material. Anyone who does not wish to confront the material does not have to see the show.

In our experience, controversies of this sort are best handled by enriching the conversation, not restricting it. We suggest that you host a “talk-back” after the performance so the audience can ask questions and perhaps hear from experts on free speech, theatre, and politics. We also suggest that you continue to explore ways for students to express their points of view through the school newspaper, classroom projects, assemblies, etc. This allows for a continued community conversation in response to the play without silencing the actors’ voices.

Finally, we understand you are concerned that the play might be perceived as a reflection of the school’s position on the Iraq war. Again, this is easily remedied with a disclaimer in the program noting that the school does not endorse or share all the views presented in the play. However, by controlling the play’s content, you would accurately be perceived as endorsing the views it expressed.

We urge you to encourage student creativity and civic engagement, and to teach students the skills to discuss opposing views respectfully. You cannot accomplish these critical educational goals – the goals that inspire the First Amendment – by substituting your words for theirs and papering over real issues on which they disagree. We urge you to allow the students to perform their play in school and un-edited by the administration.

If we can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to call us: (212) 807-6222, ext. 15.

Sincerely,

Joan Bertin, Executive Director
National Coalition Against Censorship

Roger C. Vann, Executive Director
ACLU of Connecticut

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American Booksellers For Freedom of Expression (ABFFE)

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Members of the Youth Advisory Board
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Award-winning playwrights, composers, lyricists and librettists of the Dramatists Guild:

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Edward Albee
Christopher Durang
John Weidman
Marsha Norman
Doug Wright
John Guare
John Patrick Shanley
Tina Howe
David Henry Hwang
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Stephen Flaherty
Susan Birkenhead
James Lapine
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Michael Weller
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Emily Mann
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