

MESSAGE FROM PRINCIPAL TIM CANTY

March 26, 2007

Dear students and families,

Over the past weekend, there was discussion in the print and broadcast media on my decision to postpone second semester performance of a play being developed in Wilton High School's Advanced Theater Arts class called "Voices in Conflict." The play is a devised piece that uses the words of United States soldiers and Iraqi citizens to discuss the Iraq war. I approved the development of this project prior to the start of the 2006-2007 second semester with the understanding that the play would honor those serving in our armed forces and help Wilton High School students gain perspective about the complex issues associated with the Iraq war.

Please see below the Wilton Public Schools press release on this matter.

WILTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Dr. Gary Richards, Superintendent

March 24, 2007

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Wilton Public Schools administration would like to respond to the issues raised in *The New York Times* article entitled "Play About Iraq War Divides a Connecticut School" that appeared in the "Metro Section" on Saturday, March 24, 2007. The article describes the controversy in the WHS Advanced Theater Arts class about a play called "Voices in Conflict" compiled by students for performance during this spring semester. The play contains monologues about the Iraq war by U.S. soldiers and Iraqi citizens. The article describes the work of the Theater Arts class to develop the play, Principal Tim Canty's decision and rationale for stopping the performance of the play at this time, and the resulting critical reactions by some students and parents.

This is a sensitive situation for a school community because of the complex issues and strong feelings involved. We also see it as an opportunity to extend the educational dialogue. With that goal in mind, we will summarize how we got to this point, our concerns about the performance of the play as written and our plans for next steps.

All school programs need to serve a legitimate educational purpose. The Iraq war, of course, is an important, serious, complex, and critical topic for a high school to address. In recent years, we have addressed the war in many ways including debates by experts, panel discussions, Social Studies courses and units, class discussions, etc. When the Theater Arts teacher

first broached the idea of a play honoring soldiers in Iraq, we supported exploring it with the understanding that there would be on-going communication between the teacher and administration. However, after seeing subsequent drafts, we have serious concerns. The play has contained direct excerpts from a book, documentary films, letters to newspapers, and web-sites. These sources are modified and “cut and pasted” together in a way that does not give them attribution nor cite the viewpoint of the particular author or filmmaker. The script contains language that, while realistic, is graphic and violent. In addition, the format includes the student performers directly acting the part of the soldiers, rather than appearing as readers of their journals, letters, interviews, etc. In our view, this approach turns powerful material into a dramatic format that borders on being sensational and inappropriate.

School performances are different from private or commercial performances. Because the performance is part of the educational program, we have a unique obligation to our audience. Most people understand that we can not perform plays or musicals that contain vulgar language or strong sexual content because it would be inappropriate for a high school student audience. On a much more serious level, we believe that this play can be upsetting to our student, parent, and community audience. Our community, like many, is grieving the loss of our own and feeling anxious about those currently in harm’s way. As a school, we have a responsibility to ensure that the Iraq war, the lives lost, and the sacrifices made by soldiers and their families are presented in the appropriate context with appropriate support and guidance. We need to figure out how best to do that. In its present form, the play does not meet those standards.

We understand and appreciate the frustration that the Theater Arts students feel. Furthermore, we believe it is important to continue the dialogue. We would like to work with the students to complete a script that fully addresses our concerns. We then would like to explore appropriate settings to share the script so that guided discussion and support would be available. We also would like to explore the issues involved in this situation in larger contexts. We will work with the Social Studies teachers to continue teaching and discussion about the war in Iraq. In addition, we will plan discussions in those classes around free speech, public school responsibilities, proper use of sources, and other related issues.

We plan to work through this complicated situation together with the students and staff. I am optimistic that we will find an outcome that will be responsive to the concerns of all parties.

Dr. Gary Richards, Superintendent

The students who were looking forward to performing the play in the coming months, many of whom are seniors, were understandably frustrated and upset when they learned of my decision. The students in the class, with support from faculty members, have been working on this project since the beginning of the semester. I am proud of these students for their effort in voicing their opinions in defense of their strong beliefs about why the performance should move forward this semester.

I look forward to working with faculty and students to continue to develop a project that meets appropriate educational standards. This has been an ambitious undertaking by our faculty and students. I know that we will work together to discuss these complicated issues in the coming days in the respectful and trusting environment that characterizes our school community. As classes resume on Tuesday, March 27, we look forward to working together as a community of learners to take advantage of the “teachable moment” that this opportunity presents to our school.

Sincerely,

Tim Canty
Principal
Wilton High School