

January 24, 2017

President J. Barry Dickinson  
Members of the School Board  
Cherry Hill Public Schools Board of Education  
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Dear President Dickinson and Members of the Board:

As a coalition of organizations concerned with protecting free artistic expression, we write to express our concerns about the redaction of racial epithets from the musical *Ragtime* at Cherry Hill High School East. We urge you to reconsider this educationally harmful and legally problematic decision and allow the musical to be staged in its full integrity.

Our understanding is that Cherry Hill High School East has been preparing to stage a production of the Tony Award-winning musical *Ragtime* for the last several months with the play scheduled to open on March 10. On January 18 the Camden County East Branch of the NAACP sent a letter to Superintendent Joseph Meloche and condemned the decision to perform a musical that included racial slurs. The Cherry Hill African American Civil Association also met in person with the administration to express its concerns. Soon afterwards, school officials released a statement saying the school would “remove offensive language from the enacted script.” The musical is set in the early 1900s and explores the lives of a wealthy white American family, a family of Jewish immigrants, and an African-American ragtime musician in Harlem. At several times throughout the musical, characters utter a racial slur.

Staging a musical provides an engaging educational experience. Musicals enable student-actors to explore and embody perspectives and social circumstances that differ from their own. At their best musicals deeply move audience members to think about the complexities of the human experience. *Ragtime*, of course, is no exception to this rule, as those who perform and view the show will gain insights into American culture of the early twentieth century.

Redacting the script will undercut these benefits. *Ragtime*'s use of racial slurs is an historically accurate and necessary aspect of a play that explores race relations in the early 1900s. *Ragtime* helps minors understand the brutalities of racism and the anger that has historically accumulated, partly through the use of racially offensive language. In contrast,  **censorship of such language ignores historical reality and presents a**

Joan E. Bertin  
*Executive Director*

**NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS**

Actors' Equity Association  
American Association of School Administrators  
American Association of University Professors  
American Association of University Women  
American Booksellers for Free Expression  
American Civil Liberties Union  
American Ethical Union  
American Federation of Teachers  
American Jewish Committee  
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  
Catholics for Choice  
Children's Literature Association  
College Art Association  
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund  
The Creative Coalition  
Directors Guild of America  
The Dramatists Guild of America  
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund  
Educational Book & Media Association  
First Amendment Lawyers Association  
Free Speech Coalition  
International Literacy Association  
Lambda Legal  
Modern Language Association  
National Center for Science Education  
National Communication Association  
National Council for the Social Studies  
National Council of the Churches  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Council of Teachers of English  
National Education Association  
National Youth Rights Association  
The Newspaper Guild/CWA  
PEN American Center  
People For the American Way  
Planned Parenthood Federation of America  
Project Censored  
SAG-AFTRA  
Sexuality Information & Education Council of the U.S.  
Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators  
Student Press Law Center  
Union for Reform Judaism  
Union of Democratic Intellectuals  
Unitarian Universalist Association  
United Church of Christ  
Office of Communication  
United Methodist Church,  
United Methodist Communications  
Women's American ORT  
Woodhull Sexual Freedom Alliance  
Writers Guild of America, East  
Writers Guild of America, West

**falsified, whitewashed view of race relations.** Censoring the play will only perpetuate ignorance of our past.

While we empathize with concerns about the emotionally disturbing effects of hearing or uttering racial slurs, we believe such concerns are to be resolved through educational means, not by censoring a renowned text. In our experience, similar concerns (around productions of *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Of Mice and Men*, for instance) have best been confronted through dialogue rather than censorship. As Cherry Hill Public Schools has noted in its statement, students “will participate in learning activities stemming from *Ragtime* in an effort to use our history to further expose the ugliness of racism.” These activities will benefit all students, especially if they allow students to explore the complex relationship between free speech, theater, history, and literature. On the other hand,  **censorship will not “expose the ugliness of racism.” Rather, it will further obscure it.**

Finally, we note that **unauthorized modifications to *Ragtime*’s script may violate copyright law and licensing agreements.** In the absence of explicit permission from copyright holders, any modification of the text can lead to a revocation of Cherry Hill High School East’s right to perform the musical.

In summary, we urge you to reconsider and reverse your decision to censor *Ragtime*. When paired with learning activities that further explore historical racism, performance of the uncensored musical will provide students with valuable and enriching educational experiences.

Sincerely,



Svetlana Mintcheva  
National Coalition Against Censorship



Ralph Sevush  
Dramatists Guild of America



Howard Sherman  
Arts Integrity Initiative

