

September 16, 2014

School Board President John Engel
South Williamsport Board of Education
515 West Central Avenue
South Williamsport, PA 17702

Dear Mr. Engel,

I'm Julie Woffington, executive director of the Educational Theatre Association. EdTA is the national voice for school theatre, with more than 100,000 student members and 5,000 professional theatre educators. I'm writing you to express my concern about the cancellation of South Williamsport High School's production of the musical *Spamalot*. *Spamalot* is a popular work among high schools, with dozens of productions mounted annually throughout the country. I understand your board's concern about certain aspects of the play, but I would also ask that you consider what *Spamalot* and its cancellation teaches students about tolerance, inclusion, and free speech in a democratic society.

Theatre tells stories, and more than anything else, theatre teaches empathy: how to "walk in somebody else's shoes" and gain an understanding of other points of view. In order for our children to mature into responsible citizens they must learn how to make choices in the many life-changing moments they will experience throughout their lives.

I am asking you to reconsider and let your students, with the guidance of their teacher, make such a choice by restoring the production of *Spamalot* on your school's stage. I realize that South Williamsport has received a great deal of media attention, perhaps much of it unwarranted. And I am certain that you and your leadership colleagues' are committed to the best interest of your students and the community. I am not writing to critique your decision, but to ask that you revisit it with some new resources and facts, among them EdTA's Freedom of Expression statement. The statement provides guidelines in the play selection process and policy guidance for school and district administrators.

I would also ask that you consider these facts about the value of theatre education in a well-rounded education:

- Theatre nurtures and teaches valuable social and workforce skills such as creativity, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking. For a comprehensive overview of how theatre fosters these skills and others in the classroom and in life see the 21st Century Arts Map.
- In the Champions for Change research compendium, researchers found that "sustained learning" in theatre correlates to greater success in math and reading, and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds see the greatest benefit.
- In EdTA's 2011 Survey of High School Theatre Programs in the United States, 98 percent of surveyed theatre administrators said that theatre strengthens students' self-confidence and develops self-discipline and creativity skills.

I hope these facts and resources are useful to you and your fellow South Williamsport School Board members. Like you, EdTA is committed to helping students and putting their needs first.

Sincerely,

Julie Woffington
Executive Director
Educational Theatre Association
Cc: Mark Stamm, Jesse Smith