

# Connecticut School Will Perform Wilson Play Despite Official's Objection

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Joe Turner will indeed come to Waterbury, Conn. After three hours of discussion on Wednesday night and testimony from community members and other interested parties, including the dean of the Yale School of Drama, the Waterbury Board of Education allowed a public school's production of the August Wilson play "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" to proceed in February.

In doing so, board members overruled an initial decision by their schools superintendent, who had [tried to cancel the play](#) because its dialogue includes several uses of the word "nigger."

"Joe Turner's Come and Gone" is part of the landmark 10-play cycle about the African-American experience in the 20th century by Wilson, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner. The play had its [premiere on Broadway](#) in 1988 and received a [critically acclaimed revival](#) there in 2009, drawing, among others, President Obama and Michelle Obama on their [New York date night](#) in the fourth month of his presidency.

The production by the Waterbury Arts Magnet School, which has cast junior-year and senior-year high school students in the major roles, was considered and approved through the usual channels this winter, school officials have said. But Superintendent David L. Snead raised concerns this month, saying that the school and educators should not be staging a play that might encourage use of the word. Mr. Snead, who is black, argued that some civil rights leaders oppose the casual use of the word in music and slang.

On Wednesday night Board of Education officials heard from more than 30 audience members out of a crowd of 150; among the speakers were students in the cast and crew of the production. According to Nina A. Smith, the director of the play and a theater arts teacher at the school, as well as newspaper accounts, the discussion included both support and opposition to the production; those favoring it appeared to be in the majority, Ms. Smith said.

Some students said they were worried that canceling the play would have a chilling effect, making the school more reluctant to take risks on plays and musical projects in the future. No student spoke against the play, Ms. Smith said in an interview. But others in attendance said that they were offended by the use of the word and that the board should go along with the view of Mr. Snead, as the top educator in the system.

James Bundy, the Yale dean, who is also artistic director of Yale Repertory Theater, where "Joe Turner" and several other Wilson plays were developed in the 1980s and early '90s, spoke at the school board meeting about the history of Wilson's work and the

dialogue in his plays, which Wilson wanted to echo the language and musicality of the way many African-Americans spoke at different points in the last century.

The board also received written comments, among them [a letter from Howard Sherman](#), executive director of the American Theater Wing, which co-presents the Tony Awards, urging that the play be allowed to go on and serve as an educational experience.

At the meeting Mr. Snead shared his personal feelings about the word but also said that he wanted the debate to become a teachable moment, according to Ms. Smith. (Mr. Snead has not returned phone messages seeking comment.)

Board members ultimately decided to rescind a motion to vote on the production, which had been put on the table at a meeting earlier this month. In doing so, though, the board directed the Arts Magnet School to seek guidance from Yale Rep and another Connecticut theater, Hartford Stage, on the “Joe Turner” production as well as on pre-show discussions and post-performance talkbacks that would help put the play and its language in historical context for audience members.

Ms. Smith said that while some board members still appeared to oppose the idea of the production, no one vigorously fought the matter once the inclusion of Yale Rep, Hartford Stage and the pre- and post-show discussions was proposed. She said she was delighted by the outcome: “The students and I are thrilled to have our school’s support, and now the board’s support, and the idea of bringing in theater experts and others will only make this a better experience for us and for the community.”

The play is set to have at least four performances in Waterbury in early February, she said.

**Source:**

[http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/20/connecticut-school-will-perform-wilson-play-despite-officials-objection/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=0](http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/20/connecticut-school-will-perform-wilson-play-despite-officials-objection/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0)