

Testimony on Behalf of Supporters of Dr. Arthur Siebens

By Sarah Cox-Shrader

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PUBLIC ROUNDTABLE BY THE COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON

"PROGRESS IN MODERNIZING AND IMPROVING DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA SCHOOL FACILITIES"

**FRIDAY, JULY 11, 2008, 1:00 P.M.
JOHN A. WILSON BUILDING, COUNCIL CHAMBERS
1350 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE, N.W.**

I am proud to be a student at Wilson. Wilson is one of the best high schools in the DCPS system, with many dedicated teachers and motivated students. But I will not deny that Wilson has its problems, for example the facilities, which are at times perhaps sub-standard. However, I would argue that the physical state of our building is the least of our problems, in the face of those teachers and staff who are less than dedicated and effective, and the academic discrepancy between different student demographics. A lot of students truly thrive at Wilson, but an appalling number fall through the cracks, a fact that is unacceptable, yet sadly undeniable. The fact that these discrepancies too often fall along socio-economic and racial lines leads to some of the sticky racial politics at my school. It would be untrue to speak of Wilson without acknowledging these issues, as difficult as they may be.

This coming year, my senior year, will be marked by a great deal of change at Wilson, due mostly to the effects of the restructuring process that is underway. On the one hand, I recognize the necessity of restructuring as a way to satisfy the stipulations of the federal No Child Left Behind law. On the other hand, I see restructuring as an opportunity for the Wilson community to come together to try to fix some of our problems. Our school is much more than just a building where teachers teach and students absorb information. We have dedicated teachers, devoted parents, and enthusiastic students who together comprise a community that knows the school inside and out, knows its strengths and weaknesses, knows what works and what doesn't. I am glad that Wilson's problems, which are very serious and very real, are being recognized, and that there are people out there, people with the power to make big decisions, people such as Mayor Fenty, Chancellor Rhee, our new Principal Pete Cahall, and the members of the City Council, who care enough about my school to work hard at helping realize its potential.

This past year, I have been more involved in my school's affairs than I have ever been before, and I have come to care more deeply than ever about what happens to Wilson. I believe I speak for many of my classmates when I say this, and I can tell you that I am not alone in wanting to make a difference in the way our school is restructured. The student voice at Wilson is a powerful one, and one that is well-worth listening to. I sincerely hope that those of you who are in charge decide to

harness the incredible enthusiasm of the students, because we are the ones who know our school best, because we are the ones for whom these decisions are being made, and because we have so much to offer.

I am here today with fellow and former Wilson students, who feel as strongly about these issues as I do. In the spirit of working together for change, we would like to raise a more specific issue concerning the implementation of restructuring. In addition to what you will hear from them concerning the dismissal of the biology teacher Dr. Siebens, we have attached to our written testimonies a personal note about each of our experiences with Dr. Siebens as our teacher. Thank you.

Testimony on Behalf of Supporters of Dr. Arthur Siebens

By Hanna Mahon

Woodrow Wilson High School '09 and student of Dr. Siebens 2007-2008

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Good Afternoon. My name is Hanna Mahon and I will soon be a senior at Wilson High School.

While restructuring sounds like a great step in the right direction, we believe that its implementation at Wilson contradicts its alleged purpose.

The specific case that we want to discuss is that of the unjust and perplexing "displacement" of Dr. Arthur Siebens, Wilson's legendary Biology teacher of 18 years.

Upon hearing that Dr. Siebens was not asked to return, we posed the question that continues to vex all of us students, parents, teachers, community members, and even Dr. Siebens himself: Why?

I first posed this question to Dr. Siebens, and after a month, all he has been told is that he "doesn't fit in". This justification is both troubling and nebulous. Declaring that someone "doesn't fit in" should not be a standard for improving Wilson and other DC Public Schools

I next took my confusion to the administration. I received this reply from the Chancellor: "I appreciate you taking the time to write to me, Hanna. I'm going to touch base with the people who are leading this tomorrow to get more information." I am still unsure as to whom she contacted, but I decided to move on and find a way to get a real answer.

It was then that I received an email from a Wilson parent, John Lawrence. I thought that with this email I would finally understand why one of my favorite teachers had suddenly been removed, as Mr. Lawrence himself was the Democratic staff director of the House committee that wrote the federal No Child Left Behind law. As it turned out, Mr. Lawrence was just as perplexed as I was, if not more. Wrote Lawrence to Chancellor Rhee:

I cannot understand the decision to terminate this gifted and popular instructor; what's more, from my conversation with Dr. Siebens, he is unaware of any specific rationale for his dismissal.

Such actions by DCPS are inconsistent with sound education administration, and certainly have no relationship whatsoever to the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act.

So, if the dismissal of Dr. Siebens could not be properly explained by Dr. Siebens himself, by the Chancellor in charge of the restructuring process, or by a man who helped write the restructuring law, where could I find this information?

I decided that my last option was to read the official LEA Restructuring Plan for Wilson and determine the cause of this arbitrary dismissal for myself.

While page 7 of this plan acknowledges that "there are clearly instances of good teaching and strong student results at Wilson" -- like Dr. Siebens -- I could not find any standards or process by which a teacher would be removed.

I did note some very useful information while reading this plan, however, including the paragraph that explains the intention to "engage in a process of implementing professional development for staff on culturally responsive teaching and serving the needs of specific student subgroups."

It seems to me that instead of ridding Wilson of incredible teachers like Dr. Siebens, we should retain them and have them work on the culturally responsive teaching that the Wilson restructuring plan itself recommends. In this manner, students would benefit from both great teachers and restructuring. To toss him aside is to forget that at the end of the day schools are all about teaching.

Yes, Wilson's priorities are changing., but do not remove Dr. Arthur Siebens for reasons that do not relate to his teaching. Do not leave this fantastic teacher behind as Wilson moves on to face these big changes; let's take him with us. We'll need him.

Testimony on Behalf of Supporters of Dr. Arthur Siebens

By Alexandra L. Klass

Class of 2006, Wilson

Class of 2010, Wesleyan University, history major

AP Biology student of Dr. Siebens 2004-2005

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I took Dr. Siebens' AP biology class my junior year at Wilson. I've never been an outstanding science student; throughout my time at Wilson I often struggled to succeed in my math, chemistry, or physics classes. Looking back on my time at Wilson, Dr. Siebens was one of the two best teachers I ever had.

Dr. Sieben's extensive knowledge of the topics he taught was immediately obvious. His AP class required readings from a massive college biology textbook, but the core of the class consisted of his lectures, which clarified complicated concepts from the page into information I could actually understand. The many songs he wrote to explain complex biological concepts helped also. When it came time for tests, he clearly indicated what information was important so none of us would be unfairly surprised by a concept we hadn't anticipated. Looking to Dr. Siebens' long list of accomplishments as both a scholar and a teacher underscores his thorough understanding of biology, as well as his ability and deep commitment to teach teenagers.

The extent of his academic work before he began a successful career teaching high school is in itself impressive. He received his Ph.D. in Physiology at The George Washington University. He taught medical students as a guest lecturer at the Yale Medical School, and at the University of Maryland medical school. His accomplishments include post-doctoral fellowships at the National Institute of Health as a senior staff fellow, and at the American Heart Association.

I could continue discussing his scholarly accomplishments, but more important than these fellowships, research awards, and lecturer positions is that he chose to use his expertise not to pursue a cushy position in the ivory tower, but to serve others by teaching science to 14-18 year olds in an urban public school. Dr. Siebens has taught science at Wilson for 18 years. My year's AP exam pass rate was 71%, a statistic that few teachers can boast of. This past year's pass rate was 76%. 17 out of 54 students tested received a score of 5, the highest possible grade on an advanced placement exam, one that typically allows a student to bypass introductory level college biology at universities nation-wide.

Looking at objective indicators of success such as test scores and awards clearly demonstrate Dr. Siebens' remarkable abilities to teach. However, the facts merely reinforce what years of students and alumni have experienced: his commitment and talent for teaching, even compared to some of the tenured professors at US colleges. Dr. Siebens longstanding dedication to student success did not go unnoticed either. He was recognized by both the Washington Academy of Sciences in 2000, with the Bernice Lamberton Award for teaching of science in high school, and the College Board's Middle States Regional Assembly with the Advanced Placement Recognition award.

From the start of the course, he demanded success, and lots of hard work, from every student. Correspondingly, I matched his high expectations with hard work. When I was having trouble completing some homework assignments, we sat down and worked out a different format for the assignments so that I spent my out of class time studying in a way that was best for me.

My score would have allowed me to accelerate a biology program in college, had I not majored in History. My college requires me to attempt a bit of science in order to graduate, and I have taken two courses aimed at non-science majors. Neither of those professors set high expectations for student success, and in neither of them have I done nearly as well or learned nearly as much as I did in Dr. Siebens AP biology class. The students at Wilson will lose an exceptionally talented and caring educator if he is not rehired immediately. Losing such a teacher will irrationally deprive hundreds of students from the knowledge I was lucky to gain while attending Wilson.

Testimony on Behalf of Supporters of Dr. Arthur Siebens

By Michael Jayes

Woodrow Wilson High School '06 and former student of Dr. Siebens AP Biology class

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Council, my name is Michael Jayes and I am a 2006 Woodrow Wilson High School graduate and former student of Dr. Arthur Siebens. I come before you today on behalf of those in the Wilson community who are shocked and dismayed by the dismissal of Dr. Siebens from the Wilson faculty. Dr. Siebens lost his position as a teacher of AP Biology, Zoology, and Human Anatomy as a result of the school restructuring process at Wilson. I am here today to demonstrate that this presents a tremendous loss to the Wilson community.

Dr. Siebens was more personally invested in my education than any other teacher at Wilson. Dr. Siebens made your education *his* business. In addition to regular class time, he held extra classes during lunch, after school, and on school holidays for those who needed extra help. He went out of his way to call each of his more than 50 AP students to discuss their personal performance on the AP exam. Our conversation lasted about 20 minutes, and if you multiply that by the more than 50 students who took his class- that's a lot of unremunerated time!

Dr. Siebens was also extremely supportive of those students who struggled in his class. The rigorous nature of the AP Biology curriculum left many students feeling panicked, but Dr. Siebens always went out of his way to bring those students up to speed. He would take the pulse of the class at the start of each lecture to gauge its comfort level with the material. If need be, he would always slow the pace of the class down to help those who were having difficulty grasping the subject matter. In addition, Dr. Siebens created a "buddy system" to help those who were struggling in the class. Each student that needed extra help was paired with a student that felt relatively comfortable with the material. Study buddies were given an extra credit incentive to meet each week. These policies helped create an atmosphere in which we all felt motivated to succeed.

The dedication that Dr. Siebens gives to the education of each individual is invaluable at a large public high school like Wilson. I thrived at Wilson because of the talented and dedicated individuals that made it their job to make a difference in my life. There are far too few such teachers, and Wilson cannot afford to lose this one.

And one last thing- he sang us songs he wrote and recorded about biology (see attached). What other teacher does that? The tunes and lyrics still ring in my ears. Thank you.

A personal note from Sarah Cox-Shrader

I have never learned so much in a single course as I did this past year in AP Biology with Dr. Siebens. I never used to enjoy science much as a subject, until I had Dr. Siebens as a teacher, and he taught me in such a way that I came to love and to care about what I was learning. Part of his skill as a teacher comes from making the subject matter interesting enough to inspire his students to work their hardest and to learn as best they can. But he is also incredibly gifted at explaining some of the most complex concepts of biology. For example, he has written and recorded over 30 songs to help students remember concepts and terms. Sitting down to take the AP Biology exam, I was struck by my level of comfort and lack of anxiety, because I knew that Dr. Siebens had prepared me well. I have never seen a teacher so dedicated to his students. He loves teaching, and he always does whatever he can to ensure that we are not only learning effectively, but that we are having fun doing it. Dr. Siebens is one of those teachers who you never forget, who always pops into mind when you are asked to recall the greatest teachers you've had.

Not only does Dr. Siebens care tremendously about ensuring that we learn the material well (his motto is "Yes, I am pressed for your success"), but he genuinely cares about each of his students as individuals. He is fond of bragging about former students, and always encourages us to invite him to any extra-curricular sports games or dance performances we might be participating in. He hosts a twice-annual dinner party for all his students, simply because he loves teaching and he loves his students. Though most of the songs on his two "BioRhythms" CDs are about biology, my favorite of them all is the one titled "Do You Know How Much I Miss You On Vacation?" It is an ode to his students, and professes the "emptiness he feels inside" when he is not teaching. I have never, in my thirteen years of formal schooling and my eleven years in DCPS, had or even heard of a teacher as dedicated as Dr. Siebens.

A letter sent to Dr. Siebens at the end of the school year...

Dear Dr. Siebens,

My first two years of high school were spent at a school where I never felt a connection to my teachers and at the end of each year I didn't really feel like giving them thanks was necessary or even appropriate. This year is extremely different because I have teachers who care about me and teachers I can talk to. I believe that the teachers I've had this year, more than any other year of my life, deserve all of my thanks. So, thank you.

Thank you, Dr. Siebens, for teaching me. Your class was so amazing because you know how to make everyone understand and you know how to prepare everyone for the AP exam (not just those kids who naturally understand all of molecular biology). You never stop teaching (even up until the last day of class) and I am truly so grateful for that because I see how much you really care. I have learned SO much from your class this year and I wish I could write this letter in a way that allows you to understand just how much your teaching has affected me. I knew literally nothing about biology until this year and now I feel so comfortable talking about it and saying to people, "Yeah, I know everything about biology. Ask me whatever you want." I really recognize how hard you have worked to make your class as effective as possible and even though I made some suggestions for next year, you must realize that I value your teaching methods above anyone else's.

Thank you for caring. The fact that you love all of us has always been so clear to me. It has helped me to know that if I forget my homework or if I am not ready for a test you will understand. This is not the case of teacher vs. student because you care about us and you work with us and you really always want the best for us. I am so amazingly grateful for this. You want our feedback because you want to improve your class and so few teachers do this because they think they know it all, but I have always known that you really respect us. I also know that when I don't have a lunch or if I am having a problem with a certain teacher, I can come to you and tell you about it. I really feel like more than anything we are friends, and you telling me to pay attention in class is really just because you care and you want me to learn.

Thank you for everything you have done for me this year. At the beginning of the year I was in a new school with no teachers I knew or trusted and I could tell almost immediately that you would become someone I could talk to. I had such an amazing time in your class and I hope you know that everyone who takes your class can easily agree that you go above and beyond most teachers. You actually teach us and you actually care that each of us learns and lives up to our true potential and I know I am repeating myself, but you are truly an amazing teacher.

Thank you so much for the knowledge you have given me this year.

Hanna Mahon