

**DC City Council, Youth Hearing, 7/12/08**

**Wilson Students Take Questions from Council Members  
Following Testimony about the Removal of Wilson Biology Teacher, Dr. Art Siebens**

**DC CITY COUNCIL CHAIR, VINCENT GRAY:** And both of these are songs that were composed by Dr. Siebens, is that right? And as I look at your testimony, they weren't yesterday or even in this school year. [Yes.] They go back to 2001 and 1999, respectively. Is that right? [Uh-hum.]

You know, as I said yesterday, it doesn't get any better to have, to be a teacher and to be admired and respected – in the way that he obviously is, by you and apparently by so many other students. And I honestly don't understand a decision would lead to somebody who is this creative, this dedicated, this devoted, this involved, not being a fit in the DC public school system. If a man like this is not a fit, then who is a fit? He obviously, you know, if we listen to the lyrics, he *loves* his job; He *loves* kids. I mean, you don't have to be a rocket scientist or a nuclear physicist in order to understand the commitment that he has to young people.

I was looking at – it's where he was talking about how much he misses the kids when he's on vacation. I mean, lots of people can't wait for a vacation and regret the fact that they have to go back after vacation. It sounds like he's just the opposite.

I am going to take the time to meet with him, as I said yesterday, because I really want to get, you know, to know him firsthand. And you know, not only have we heard from students, *many* students at Wilson about him and Mr. Shea, also, who apparently now is being invited back, and chose not to. But we've heard from parents as well. I know there are parents here today, from Wilson. There are parents who I've heard from in the course of all of this, who really are just completely puzzled, as to why a situation like this – has happened. I want to thank you all for being here today and having such a creative way of presenting the testimony – on behalf of an obviously beloved teacher.

And you know, you're fortunate also, because two councilmembers who are with me here today, one, Councilmember Cheh, represents the area of the city where Wilson is located and Councilmember Alexander is a graduate of Wilson High School. So you got two members here who can relate firsthand to the experience, and I think can understand quite well the importance of a teacher like this. I don't know to what we have to get full answers on this, but to be quite honest with you, I think a mistake was made.

It's my understanding from listening to the testimony yesterday, that the original recommendation came from someone who had been at the school for two months? [Um-hum.] And then that was somehow affirmed by a person who then was new to the school. Is that correct? [Yes.] So two people together had a collective two months of experience at the school and made a decision like this about someone who is obviously universally respected, universally loved, and frankly, effective.

I mean, you look at the results. Look at the data. Look at the advanced placement scores of the kids and it's this kind of creativity that, you know, that you see in these songs, that – what sets good teachers apart from excellent teachers. You know, I can well remember back to my days in high school, when there were certain teaching methods that were used that just kind of stick with you, you know, forever. You know, ways of teaching you something that you remember forever.

And I have a feeling that these songs – I suspect this isn't just the only way that in which his creativity has been evident, but I suspect that these songs have probably stuck with more than a few students as a way of learning. I can't imagine. I mean it's just so creative to think that you know the function of a kidney being described this way. I heard it through the grapevine. [Laughter] Or I felt it through the grapevine. [Laughter]

Well, we're going to do what we can. I wish we had the authority to be able to hire him back, because I would in a New York minute. But we will do what we can to try to bring some redress to just plain, a mistake. [Thank you so much.] If it's not a mistake, I'll like somebody to stand up and say why it is not. But everything we've heard thus far would suggest an egregious error has been made here and that our young people are going to be deprived of a wonderful teacher, role model and somebody who loves his students.

**SARAH COX-SHRADER:** That's all we're really asking and we have some more people coming up to you. We just want everyone's voice to be heard in this matter. We want to reach as many people as we can with this issue.

**VINCENT GRAY:** Councilmember Cheh?

**DC COUNCILMEMBER MARY CHEH, WARD 3:** Thank you Mr. Chairman. Let me just, first of all, thank you for the songs. They were fantastic. Now I'll know a little bit more about Biology myself. But, Sarah – you have the email from the LSRT Chair? [Yes.] Yes. And the – but I want people to understand what this process was, at least according to this email. It says:

“The reconstitution process at Wilson did not really involve re-hiring as much as an interview process that led to staff not being invited to return. They continue to have rights in the DCPS system to be hired elsewhere, but were seen not to” – and here's this language – “‘fit in’ with the Wilson restructuring plan.”

“Virtually all faculty were interviewed by Thomas Whittle, who has had an enormous amount of experience in school turnaround and knows what gets in the way. He had been at Wilson since March” – so now we're identifying the brief period of time that he was at Wilson – “and had an opportunity to get to know many of the staff very well. Out of those interviews, 11 were not invited back to Wilson. Then Mr.” – is it ‘Cah – HALL?’ ‘CAY-hall?’ [I think, Cay-hall], Cahall, the new principal – “came on board as principal, there was an appeals process for all 11. That also consisted of an interview, with Mr. Cahall. That resulted in Mr. Shea” – another teacher – “being returned, but not as a teacher – not in his former – ah – but AS a teacher – not in his former capacity.” – I'm not sure what that means. “For all others, the decisions made by Mr. Whittle were affirmed.”

So that, essentially, Mr. Chairman, it looks as though the process here is for someone at the school to interview everybody and make a decision. And then if you wanted to appeal that, you have another interview. But I take it that, you're in a bit of a bind then, because, to be invited back would mean to reject the decision of Mr. Whittle. [Exactly.] Isn't that right? So that was the quote-unquote process.

I've have had many emails about Dr. Siebens and many people have complained that this doesn't really amount to process. [Yes.] You know, what kind of evaluation is it? Now, I want you to know, I have been trying to set up a meeting with the Chancellor and the principal and some students and parents at Wilson to see if we could sort this out. I do believe that the Chancellor wants it to be done at the local level, to empower the new principal and not to second-guess the new principal. Nonetheless, I would welcome your assistance, Mr. Chairman. You've offered

some help here. I would like to have a meeting to determine what really was the basis for the decision and whether it's justifiable. So I'll enlist your good offices and I'll see if we can't get such a meeting.

I don't know what the consequences will be. As the Chairman pointed out, we have no role to play here and no authority to play here. All we can do is to try to see whether by a close second look, whether this was really the correct thing to do. So, I'm going to be trying to do that. I'm not making any promises. And I don't know where it will lead. But we will try to do what we can do from our position.

But I want to say that it may not be, it may be modest. It may not be possible for us to effect a change here, even if one should be made because we're not the decision-makers. But, I'm very grateful to all of you and to the other people in the Wilson community who have really supported this apparently wonderful teacher. So we'll do what we can and I'll probably contact you, you know, as this goes along. If you have anything else to suggest to me, I would love to hear it.

**SARAH COX-SHRADER:** I'd just like to say that I think it goes beyond just this one incidence of this amazing teacher not being rehired. I think, and I think it goes beyond the fact that it was just these two people who didn't have very much experience at Wilson, making these decisions. But they didn't consult any students or parents. Like that whole segment of the Wilson community was left out of these decisions and I think that that kind of speaks to the way that they're going about this restructuring business and I think, yeah, I think that the firing of Dr. Siebens is a manifestation of how this went wrong. But I think that's a big root of the problem – is that we weren't consulted in any way.

**MARY CHEH:** Any other suggestions for me?

**HANNA MAHON:** I mean, really all we can ask you to do is like the best that you can do. And we're trying to just spread the word and get as many people involved as we can, because this really is just a really horrible situation and I know that you can't reverse the decisions yourselves, but we just want everyone to understand the situation and we just want to be heard, I guess, and see where that gets us.

**MARY CHEH:** Well, thank you, and you have been heard and I appreciate, really, all the effort you put into this – and the singing was really quite good.

**HANNA MAHON and SARAH COX-SHRADER** [Laughter] Thank you.

**MARY CHEH:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**VINCENT GRAY:** Thank you, Councilmember Cheh. Councilmember Alexander?

**COUNCILMEMBER YVETTE ALEXANDER, Ward 7:** Once Again, I am so proud to be a Wilson Tiger. [Laughter] That was in true tiger form. That singing and that testimony, quite frankly. And not only did you come in yesterday, but you're in again today. So that's how serious this situation is and I understand that.

A lot of things have been, it's been my experience that a lot of things have been, kind of reversed, you know, when we make really a big deal out of some things like this. And this is really a big deal. I want Mr. Siebens to be back at Woodrow Wilson, I mean really I do, from just what I've seen yesterday and today. And I mean, let alone a science teacher, you know, in a

very technical field that there are very few teachers, you know, we're constantly recruiting math instructors and science instructors that are really good in our DC school system. So to let go someone who is this valuable, to let someone like him go, it's senseless to me. I was wanting to ask you ladies, you young ladies, if there's been an effort in, you know, a collaborative effort, a concerted effort to go to the mayor or the chancellor? Has there been large, like a group of you, to speak to the mayor? And when did that take place and did you actually speak to the mayor?

**SARAH COX-SHRADER:** No, we've just been – all we can really do is think of to do at the moment is to send emails and there's a huge group of people who've been sending emails and such and it just seems that we were waiting for information before we did anything like bigger than that. We were waiting for responses and we haven't really been given that much information so, we were thinking maybe, we've drafted a petition that we might, that we're going to start and get people to sign and such, because we're just trying to find any way we can to reach these people who can make the decisions.

**YVETTE ALEXANDER:** So, are you going to plan, like maybe a rally, or to go down to the, you know, DCPS headquarters with the Chancellor. Is anything planned? Or maybe you can plan that.

**HANNA MAHON:** Yeah, you know, I think we've just been trying to get a feel for what would be most effective, because, we, as she said, a lot of people have been writing emails to people we consider important to people who can get things done. I haven't heard of anyone getting an email back from the mayor, and Chancellor kind of always gives the same response, like "I'll look into it," or "This is really the principal's decision." So I think at the moment, we're planning on meeting with the principal to see what we can do.

**YVETTE ALEXANDER:** Because the only reason you stated, "He didn't fit in" was the reason, so for one, if he did not fit in, what is the plan? You know, what is the plan that someone has to fit in? [Exactly.] So you haven't heard about that? What's the new direction that Wilson is taking that he doesn't fit in? Has anyone heard that?

**SARAH COX-SHRADER:** No, we've tried asking these questions and we're really just being left completely in the dark in all this and we're really just looking for answers. We don't know who to go to.

**YVETTE ALEXANDER:** Well, thanks to our chair, we did have a recess for a hearing yesterday. So we're going to reconvene that. And these are some of the questions that I'm definitely going to ask. I'm sure we want to hear from the Chancellor, you know. Or, and if it's not sufficient for her, we want to hear from the principal. You know, I don't really believe any decision should be based solely on one person and especially when there's not a valid reason for someone's dismissal. So when we, you know, continue this hearing, those are going to be some of the questions. I know you may not be able to come back out, but we're expecting testimony from the Chancellor, so you can count on me to ask those questions too.

Thank you all for your Friday and your Saturday for your testimony. I realize how serious that this is to you and I'm sure Mr. Siebens is really pleased and proud of each and every one of you. So thank you for your testimony and much success in the future for you.

**SARAH COX-SHRADER AND HANNA MAHON:** Thank you so much. Thank you so much.

**GRAY:** Thank you, Councilmember Alexander.

*[After Council Member Linda Schwartz]*

**VINCENT GRAY:** I want to thank you all too and I just want to read you an email that I just got from someone that said, “These students are really touching my heart and had me crying.” So you obviously did a good job, you know, with communicating that this was important to you. And again, we’ll do what we can to try to facilitate the situation. But I don’t understand why anybody would not want to retain, as difficult as it is to identify good teachers in the first place, and then retain them in the system because public education is a hard job. I can’t imagine why we’d want to turn somebody out who is so widely, and universally respected and loved, and obviously effective, you know, with students. Thank you all very much.

*[After Natalie Plumb]*

**VINCENT GRAY:** All right, thank you very much and, you-a -- I’m sure you’ll have an opportunity to talk to your peers when you go back. We had quite a discussion about Dr. Siebens earlier and we’re going to do what we can to try to assist the situation in which we-a. He’s just been portrayed by everybody as a fantastic teacher and someone who should be retained in the system. So we’re going to do what we can to try to help make that happen and again talk to some of your peers who were here a little earlier. They even played some songs for us that he had written in order to make Biology more interesting. And you know, the ways he’s done it are unforgettable. I’ll never listen to “I heard it though the Grapevine” again in the same way I had before I heard it today. Recognizing that it now connects to understanding kidney function.  
[Laughter]