

## 'Rent' differences stay civil

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In 1896, a four-act opera by [Giacomo Puccini](#) debuted in Turin, Italy. "La Boheme" portrayed young bohemians living in the Latin Quarter of Paris in the 1840s, ravaged by tuberculosis and poverty and the social issues of the day.

Fast forward exactly 100 years to a Pulitzer Prize-winning musical called "Rent," which is based on La Boheme: young musicians and artists are the main characters; New York's grungy Alphabet City of the early 1990s is the setting; AIDS is the affliction; sexuality and drug use are among the societal themes in question.

In Connecticut, about one hour away from the Lower East Side locale of "Rent," [Trumbull High School's](#) administration and student body are working to find a middle ground on which the show's sensitive topics can be addressed.

By now, many have heard that Trumbull High's principal, [Marc Guarino](#), out of concern for the appropriateness of the production and for its potential to offend some in the community, has halted its planned spring staging.

The leaders of the [Trumbull Public Schools](#) have always been open to discussions regarding decisions that affect student learning and growth. Mr. Guarino was thoughtful in his decision to the school's [Thespian Society](#). Clearly, he was taking the students' perspective under advisement in the hour or more he spent with the drama club explaining his views, and in the days since he announced his decision.

To their credit, THS students have responded admirably: they respectfully have shown their disappointment and disagreement through signed petitions, a Facebook page, and parent surveys.

The benefits of exposing the school and the community to the play "Rent" are undeniable. The discipline of tolerance, the gift of acceptance, the splendor of diversity, and exposure to different lifestyles are certainly lessons that should be a critical part of a high school student's education and mature growth.

THS students are expected to behave in a manner that is consistent with these values. There are many programs and school-sponsored events that celebrate the positive attributes of all students and people regardless of their preferences and proclivities.

This message of tolerance and acceptance is communicated daily in our classrooms and our hallways. It is a critical part of our schools' mission statement, which strives, through action and deeds more than carefully chosen politically correct language, to provide a safe environment conducive to learning, tolerance and understanding.

We are blessed with a district culture that abhors intolerance and promotes the old-fashioned notion of "live and let live." The decision to change the spring production will not change that culture.

Trumbull Public Schools begin the lessons on acceptance of others and the inherent benefits of diversity at the elementary level. Each school celebrates "Diversity Day," when children are introduced to many individuals who, by choice or happenstance, are "different" from most of the students' perceived norms. There is zero tolerance for behavior that contradicts this value.

And, Trumbull is and should be proud that it has one of the smallest socioeconomic gaps in academic performance in this state, which has the dubious distinction of having the highest achievement gap in the country. This is certainly a reflection of the system's focus on equality.

While I personally do not agree with the position taken by Mr. Guarino, I support his right to make that decision. This is a school decision, not a [Board of Education](#) decision, and is one that a head of school has every right to make. While much of our town may be "for Rent," I am confident that we have a firm "lease" on promoting diversity and tolerance here, too.

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