



National School Boards Association
Student Press



Strong journalism programs are essential to civics, media literacy

Story by Glenn Cook

Emily Smith's students were suspicious. They were working on a profile about the newly hired principal at Kansas' Pittsburg High School, and statements about her background and transcript weren't adding up.

Smith, who has been the school's journalism adviser for eight years, urged the students to ask hard questions and make sure their facts were verified. The students and Smith met with the superintendent of Pittsburg Community Schools and continued to work on the story, consulting with the Student Press Law Center (SPLC) in Washington, D.C., before it went to press.

"I told them, 'You must realize you don't have to do this if you don't want to. It's your decision, your paper,'" Smith says. "I said it would not be the first time or the last time they would come to a moral crossroad. What they had to do was decide whether the greater good was more important or whether their personal situation was more important."

Four days after *The Booster Redux* published the profile, calling the principal's credentials into question, she resigned. The board, which had not completed its background check when the story ran, said she was not able to produce her transcript. The next day, the story was picked up by the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*; by week's end, the students were interviewed on "Good Morning America."

In many school districts, the story never would have seen the light of day. But *The Booster Redux* and its staff is protected by the Kansas Student Publications Act, a state law that grants press freedoms to student journalists. In 37 states without such laws, districts rely on a 29-year-old U.S. Supreme Court decision—*Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*—that allows administrators to review and censor school-sponsored student publications.

Free speech and civics education advocates say *Hazelwood* has had a chilling effect on student speech. The SPLC, which has worked on behalf of high school and college journalists since the mid-1970s, cites instances over the past two years in which administrators have refused to print newspapers, pulled articles that had been posted online, and even cancelled an entire journalism program in mid-semester.

But the tide appears to be turning, at least in some areas, thanks to the New Voices movement that started in North Dakota in 2015. Six of the 13 state laws that prevent school officials from censoring student publications have been passed since New Voices began; legislation is being proposed in several more states in 2018.

"Journalism is a solution for schools and not a problem," says Frank LoMonte, SPLC's former executive director. "It should not be viewed as a problem, but as an asset, now more than ever."

Freedom works

Charles Haynes, senior scholar at the First Amendment Center, says his mantra for school administrators is "freedom works." But often experience has told him repeatedly that public schools "are the place where the First Amendment goes to die."

"Despite some hopeful signs and some very good exceptions in some school districts and states, the overall environment for the First Amendment is terrible," Haynes says. "In most public schools I encounter or visit, even the best student journalists feel under siege. Many don't feel respected."

The push for student press freedoms comes at a confusing and uncertain time for journalism, as allegations and instances of "fake news" gain traction and online information is sliced, diced, and segmented according to algorithms and searches focused on customers' niche interests. While some major outlets have beefed up their investigative teams, many newsrooms, already bled dry in the print-to-digital shift that saw dramatic drops in advertising revenue, are struggling to serve audiences that won't pay for information online or in print.

It's also a confusing time for school boards and administrators who, understandably, want to be in control of the story and the publications that go out under the district's banner. But preventing information from leaking out and reaching a large audience is increasingly difficult, because any student with access to a smartphone can write or say what they want on any number of platforms.

Steve Listopad, founder of the New Voices movement and a professor at the University of Jamestown in North Dakota, says schools should take the lead in helping students formulate and express their opinions in a public setting.

"They're going to say whatever they want to say, whether it's Twitter, Snapchat or whatever platform is in vogue that day," Listopad says. "They're going to communicate with us or without us, and we need them to talk to us. We need to hear their concerns so we can tell them if they're wrong. Not to punish them, but to tell them this story you're writing

or written is wrong for these reasons. You can't tell them they're wrong if you have no idea what they're writing or thinking about."

LoMonte, who left SPLC in August to head the University of Florida's Brechner Center for Freedom of Information, says today's students "want to have input into the decision-making process."

"Every education researcher will tell you that student voice is part of a healthy school climate," LoMonte says. "That's a non-debatable proposition. The question is: What will be the mechanism for that voice? A journalistic medium is an adult-supervised, accountable way of giving students a voice. If you don't give students a voice in that way, then you're clamping the lid on a boiling pot and asking it to explode in unhealthy ways."

Haynes points to studies that show student newspapers that are not reviewed by administrators prior to going to press are "much more responsible and professional." But school administrators who are risk averse and afraid of controversy are not inclined to put the unfettered power of the press in the hands of teenagers.

"The irony is that the imposition of prior review is sometimes imposed in an authoritarian way, and so it creates the very conditions it is designed to prevent," Haynes says. "You're saying, 'You're not part of the decision-making. You're not part of our thinking. We don't trust you, and we don't think you have rights.'"

Media literacy

Civics education advocates say all students—not just those interested in journalism—should receive media literacy training. In the wake of the contentious presidential election, schools have been criticized in some circles for de-emphasizing civics, and the issue is not going away given the controversial first year of the Trump administration.

Sarah Nichols, president of the Journalism Education Association, is a teacher and advisor for Whitney High School's comprehensive media program in Rocklin, California. She says media literacy is essential to help students develop a "more critical eye for evaluating the information they're consuming."

"Some kids are more curious than ever because they've learned to turn everything on its head and question it by default because of the world they're living in," Nichols says. "But others are so inundated with information that they don't feel like they need to look for anything. If they do wonder, they just Google it."

Smith says she works to teach her students the "value of persistence in pursuing what is right and what is good."

"That's extremely important," she says. "These are young adults who will be voting citizens, and someone has to teach them civic responsibility. It's wrong to think that they'll just cross that magic threshold in their 18th year and assume adult responsibilities. That's doing them a disservice."

Nichols says teaching the principles of a comprehensive media program have not changed since she was a high school journalist in the 1990s. If anything, the principles she teaches daily mesh nicely with the 4C's—collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and communication — touted by researchers as essential 21st century skills.

"At the core, it's the same —the principles of truth, fairness, accuracy, helping people, serving people, figuring out questions and asking questions, analyzing, synthesizing, and integrating the information," Nichols says. "The tools are different. The timing is different. The challenges are increased and all encompassing. But the core principles are the same."

Future of student journalism

While momentum in some states is shifting away from the *Hazelwood* mandate, the future of middle school and high school journalism is still up in the air. LoMonte and Lipostad estimate that, if 20 to 25 states pass free expression laws, most of the rest will soon follow suit.

Helping administrators understand that a free student press has value remains a challenge. Lipostad points to an incident that occurred in a North Dakota high school shortly after the New Voices law went into effect. The student magazine featured a cover story on a transgender student, and an assistant principal was outraged about the topic.

“The vice principal went up to the teacher and said, ‘What is this?’ and the advisor explained that students wanted to write on a topic that was important to them,” Lipostad says. “The administrator said, ‘It’s because of that damn law, isn’t it?’ That’s the attitude and the students know it. That’s why the tide is turning. If you’re a school board, you don’t want to hire that vice principal in the future. If you do, you’re a dinosaur.”

At the same time, the public’s growing distrust of the media, fueled by a divided electorate and “fake news controversies,” is forcing journalism educators to regroup and figure out how to engage students.

“When you have a president who speaks out daily against the media, it makes it that much harder for students to have the courage to keep pushing forward,” Nichols says. “They have to legitimize their existence time and again, and prove their worth over and over. That takes a level of resilience on their part.”

Smith says she’s proud of her students for being willing to ask hard questions on topics, beyond the principal story. In past years, the Pittsburg high school newspaper has taken on issues such as sexting and the ways student wrestlers were endangering their long-term health to qualify for meets.

“Nine times out of 10, our kids are asking the right questions,” she says. “They are truly concerned about their classmates, their school, and their education. And they must do it with solid reporting, on good stories people are interested in, while conducting themselves in a professional manner. Yes, there will be some ‘bad’ stories that appear in the paper, but that’s part of what makes us better. What is right isn’t always easy.”

Glenn Cook (glenncook117@gmail.com), a contributing editor to American School Board Journal, is a freelance writer and photographer in Northern Virginia. The former executive editor of ASBJ, he also spent five years as a communications director for a North Carolina school district

|

© 1940-2019 National School Boards Association