



## Making News Relevant: A how-to guide in covering the stories that count

For legal questions, free legal advice and to report censorship incidents call:  
**Student Press Law Center: 703-807-1904 or email: [www.splc.org](http://www.splc.org)**  
**Or the Great Lakes Student Press Law Center (MIPA can put you in touch)**

### Be prepared:

- Focus on the journalism and the story.
- Know the law and your school board's policy on student publications and media. Remember the courts are a last resort in resolving any dispute. High school students have a four year lifespan. When you graduate and move on, who will pick up the cause? So it's smarter to be ready than be confrontational. Keep emotions out of it.
- Build a network of supporters and fans by building strong relationships with the local media, community members, the principal, other teachers and staff, the school board members, the superintendent, union leaders, keep in touch with your staff alums and their parents. This is an ongoing effort.
- Be proactive: anticipate a problem, make a plan that's ready to go, and then methodically push forward and enlisting the help of your network of supporters (see above).
- A great example of this is the savvy and successful efforts of the staff of *The Spoke*, the Conestoga high school newspaper in Berwyn, Pa., to block a school board policy change that would have censored their newspaper. Check out the Friends of the Spoke website (<http://friendsofthespoke.org>) and watch a 36 minute presentation by the staff at the 2010 NSPA/JEA conference at <http://vimeo.com/12375359>. The Friends group was founded in 2009 when the staff faced a revision of the school district's publication policy from 48 words to seven pages that would have permitted the principal to review the contents of the paper in advance and pull stories that did not reflect the school in a positive light. To fight this censorship threat, the staff fought back and won. Not surprisingly, the proposed changes came after a number of award winning stories that any news site would have been proud to publish. The staff's efforts led to a better policy, and they learned a great social studies and civics lesson in how to get changes through public bodies like school boards. Through the website, they are sharing it with you.
- Start now to begin the process of working with your staff, your alumni, community members, local media and the school board to guarantee student press rights are protected.
- Staff editors must lead the effort. The advisor cannot and should not.

### Tactics to get the important stories published:

- Interview reputable outside sources (e.g. county health department officials, legislators, locally prominent people such as the mayor, a doctor or school board member with credentials in the subject of the article).
- Use government statistics to give your stories additional credibility – use the web to get the data. Look for relevant sites that end in [www.XXXX.gov](http://www.XXXX.gov)
- Include the local angle, but also cover angles far beyond the school's four walls – it gives less of an excuse to censor.

- Make sure all stories are well written without grammatical or spelling errors.
- Get to know your school board members and PTO leaders – they can be strong allies in the event of a censorship attempt. Make sure a staff member regularly attends and covers the school board meetings. (Suggestion: run short profiles of school board members or PTO leaders – it builds good will for the newspaper and alliances with board members.)
- If all else fails, give the local or daily newspaper or TV station in your area a phone call, give them the story and ask them to cover the controversy and the censorship.

**Avoid self-censorship!!! Too many times, too many students give up without even trying. Fight back.**

- Brainstorm for 10 good story ideas
- Whittle the list down to five to eight stories (one story for each edition of the newspaper if you are a monthly). If you, a staff member or your adviser say “we can never get that story published,” ask why, then if the story is really worthwhile, try the above tactics.

**When is Hazelwood censorship a threat?**

- If your newspaper is produced as part of a graded, credit bearing journalism course.
- If the grade for the course is solely determined by work on the student media. Your teachers should be giving quizzes and tests that will be part of your grade.
- If the school pays for the cost of printing, provides your newspapers with office space and equipment.
- If the school is private.

**To Avoid Hazelwood Censorship:**

- Make the student media self-supporting by selling advertising to pay for printing costs, equipment purchase, etc. (Even offer to pay a modest rent for space.)
- Make newspaper production an extra-curricular project outside of class time.
- Make the grade include in class quizzes, tests and papers in addition to work produced for the student media.
- Make the newspaper a public forum by inviting editorial opinions and commentaries by community members including parents, school board members, local business and community leaders.
- Think beyond the school’s four walls when choosing stories and reporting them—get experts from the government, medical personnel, etc. as well as government data.
- Build a good rapport inside and outside the building with the principal, school board members, parents and local media outlets.
- Distribute your newspaper outside of the school to subscribers, local outlets such as convenience stores, etc.

**If Censorship remains an ongoing problem, get off campus and go online!**

*(It’s the 21<sup>st</sup> Century version of an underground paper).*

There are issues with it and the editors will be responsible legally for the content, but it should escape the censors. That does not mean they will not try, however. And students may face the risk of disciplinary action. That risk lessens significantly if the off campus web site has solid reporting, writing, images and video.

- Produce a web news site using off campus computers and other gear. School officials cannot control a news site not produced within the school building or as part of a class.

## Adviser Tips

- Make sure to give quizzes and tests on lectures on media history and scholastic press law. Don't let the course grade be exclusively (or even mostly) the production of the newspaper or yearbook.
- Remember the adviser is not the editor. You teach them the skills, then they need to put them to work.
- Build allies among other teachers making sure they understand this is a student driven effort much like a play, a choir performance or an athletic event. You are the coach/director, but what happens on stage or at game time reflects the effort and talent level of the students. The football coach isn't responsible for a dropped pass, the choir director for a flat note or the drama teacher for a flubbed line. The newspaper and yearbook adviser is no different than any of them.
- Make sure the school's top administrators understand this, as well.
- Get the parents involved with potlucks, cookie day events and award ceremonies. Help them understand the important work of the student staff and its First Amendment implications to raising responsible citizens.

## Other Resources for the student press and getting the stories out:

### Student Press Law Center--<http://www.splc.org>

Have a problem, check out this website for great info, a foi generator letter, virtual lawyer legal advice.

**The Spoke**, the award-winning student newspaper of Conestoga High School in Berwyn, Pa. fought censorship and won. This link takes you to a 36 minute video clip of their presentation at the 2010 NSPA/JEA conference.

<http://vimeo.com/12375359>

[http://friendsofthespoke.org/Resources\\_for\\_a\\_publication\\_facing\\_censorship\\_-\\_Friends\\_of\\_The\\_Spoke.html](http://friendsofthespoke.org/Resources_for_a_publication_facing_censorship_-_Friends_of_The_Spoke.html)

### Journalism Education Association

A respected national group's statement on prior review: <http://www.jea.org/about/statements.html#review> and the JEA Student Press Rights Commission: <http://www.jeasprc.org/>

**Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press** Is another source for a freedom of information letter generator at <http://www.rcfp.org/foialetter/index.php>

## Relevant Story ideas:

Bullying

Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, etc.

Teen pregnancy

Teen suicide

Alcohol

Date rape

MET scores of comparable school districts

School district budget issues

Teacher, staff contracts

Others?

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