

SAY WHAT NEEDS TO BE SAID

New legislation seeks to protect student journalists

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Managing Editor

Over the past few years, states across the country have passed a “New Voices” legislation that affected the world of student journalism tremendously. This bill, which is designed to protect student journalists from scrutiny over sharing their ideas, ensures that scholastic publications would not be censored through prior review by the school’s administration.

Many schools are not able to report on multiple issues that affect them directly due to prior review. In schools that enforce this process, student journalists have to provide their publications to their administration to be reviewed and possibly censored or altered before the content reaches their audience.

“I wouldn’t be doing this if we had to go through prior review,” adviser Tammy Watkins said. “I could imagine that if a new principal came in, we might have to go through prior review. I’ve been doing this for so long that I have established that I’m not having any of that.”

Watkins has been a teacher for 27 years and advises the Wando High School newspaper. Wando’s staff produces award-winning and hard-hitting material that covers the important is-

ses happening in their community. In a school that enforces prior review, having material as effective as Wando High’s is nearly impossible.

“I think they need to foster a sense of independence in student journalists, and I think it is important to establish a relationship of trust between the staff and school administration. In my mind, prior review severs that trust completely,” Watkins said.

Wando High School publishes controversial stories, however they make an effort to remain truthful, balanced and unbiased. Even when expressing an opinion they attempt to do so in a respectful way and present both sides of the argument.

“We’ve run stories about gay marriage, we’ve run stories about abortion and we’ve run stories on gun violence. Also, the politics this year have been so crazy that they had to be covered regardless of the public’s opinion,” Watkins said.

The majority schools attending the conference are not under prior review, but publications may still receive backlash from administrators over contentious stories. Bill Romanski is a SIPA assistant and a former member of his high school’s broadcast team. Although none of their stories were prevented from being aired, they did receive some grief over a controversial piece

on neglect in their football program.

“Our administration did have problem with a segment we did about concussions,” Romanski said. “We did a concussion story and it won an Emmy, but they didn’t like it because it painted our football program in a negative light, because we reported that sometimes the players would play without fully recovering from an injury.”

Supporters of the “New Voices” bill cite the First Amendment as justification for student journalists asking their administration disputable questions about salient matters to the school and community. Just as professional journalists are protected by freedom of the press and freedom of speech, students are guaranteed these rights as well.

“I’m fully in support of the New Voices Bill, I think that it should be enforced to an extent. If all the information is true and nothing is libelous, then I don’t think anything is wrong with reporting on important topics,” Romanski said. “Just because we’re in high school, doesn’t mean we can’t be journalists and do our job as reporters.”

Not only do students rely on their school’s new staff to inform them of the matters at hand, but even entire communities do the same. The Fort Mill community in South Carolina uses the Fort Mill High School News Broadcast as

a source for information even if they do not attend the school. Influential information is not able to reach the public entirely nor accurately when prior review is implemented and forms of censorship take place continually.

“We need to educate the youth about certain issues, whether or not they are controversial, because if you censor things like that, the student and community population will not be informed,” student broadcaster Julian Masters said.

Student journalists do not only report on the serious or depressing situations. The broadcasting department of Stratford High School in South Carolina informs the school about what is happening in the community as well as in pop culture. One way that they gain student interest and involvement is by choosing a “Top Song of the Week” based on the musical interests of the students.

“Our principal sometimes asks us to change the song because some of the lyrics might be suggestive or inappropriate,” broadcaster Macy Mitchell said. “Other than that, our teacher and administration kind of understand that the students want to know what is going on in the community and form their own individual opinions about it.”

Stratford High has been able to maintain an informative and truthful

publication without strong enforcements of prior review. The school’s population and the community of Goose Creek, South Carolina uses the broadcasting department as a reliable source for information and events happening in their community knowing it is truthful and accurate.

“Journalists are telling stories and they need to be heard. The passing of the New Voices Bill would give even more validity to the First Amendment,” adviser Marisa Atkinson said.

Erin Coggins, the adviser of Sparkman High School’s journalism program has followed the “New Voices” bill for the last two years and has even proposed it to Alabama’s speaker of the house Mac McCutcheon. Coggins has partnered with Meredith Cummings, an instructor at the University of Alabama, to reach out to local professional media and raise public awareness of the issue of prior review.

“My fear is that prior review makes a publication nothing more than a public relations piece. We all know everything is not fine and dandy at any school, and student journalists should have the right to uncover information that might be hidden by the administration,” Coggins said. “Journalism was invented to be the ‘watchdogs of society’ and the ‘watchdogs of the government’, and in this case, the administration is your

government.”

The staff of her publication wanted to report on the removal of condiments from the school cafeteria. In their effort to reveal the truth, the principal deemed the matter unnecessary and refused to comment on the subject.

“The students deserve to know why the condiments are missing. Whether the topic is harmful to the school’s image or not, the adviser should be trusted to guide his or her students to cover it tastefully and responsibly,” Coggins said.

The New Voices Bill has been passed in states such as California, Oregon, Washington, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, Arkansas, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Illinois. The passing of this legislation in states who strongly enforce prior review would not only lead to more accurate stories, but a larger incentive for school administration to remain ethical.

“I think it would be huge for student journalism, especially in a state like Alabama, but more importantly, in a time period like we are in where we have a president that is pushing media as the bad guy,” Coggins said. “It would also show principals and superintendents in this area that sometimes laws need to be passed and enforced.”

CENSORED

Prior review poses threat to free speech

Saylor Cuzzort
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High school is supposed to be some of the most liberating years of your life. You are learning how to be a functional member of society all while trying to find yourself through making basic mistakes.

As an suppressed high school student, I should not have to shed my first amendment rights when I walk into school, much less the newsroom. I understand the risk on my own name but there has to be a level of trust between the administration and a journalism staff. A strong sense of trust needs to be established in order for prior review to be eliminated.

While we do have some freedoms, there is always a fear of saying the wrong thing and potentially making the school look bad. The thing our administration does not understand is that we can handle ourselves. If a parent or student were to become offended or dismayed with the materials published, the fact that we are a student publication means we can properly handle each individual situation.

Often we are encouraged to only praise our

school and administration no matter what is going on. If we begin to write an in-depth piece, we hit roadblocks in the discovery of hidden information. Whether it be a losing football team or a school scandal, we are obligated as journalists to cover the topic. However, due to the potential harm of the school’s image, we are told otherwise.

At this point, we cannot do our job as journalists to report things on both sides, because all too often our own ideas are pulled from the publication. There is a fear instilled within us that prevents us from fulfilling our duties not only as journalists, but as a newspaper and publication as a whole. The students, parents and community do not get the truth within the real story when certain parts are removed or altered.

Currently, advisers, students and first amendment activists are working with state legislation across the nation to pass the “New Voices” bill. This bill entitles high school publications the same rights as any other publication, allowing it to proceed to press without prior review. Our staff is anxiously awaiting and working in Alabama to get this bill passed. In our

eyes, it is more than just writing without someone dictating our perception, it is telling the stories that so desperately need to be told.

When there are stories to be told and problems to be made aware, a student should not feel obligated to leave out critical information that may point out another opinion or side of the story. It is difficult to write a story about a subject matter when you are told the real story but ‘off the record.’

I am in full support of the administration taking part in the classroom and being involved. However, like anything there is a right and a wrong way to go about it. Instead of using power to skew a story in a particular direction, a principal should study the first amendment as well as care and trust the importance of good journalism. Advisers and students alike are acclimated to the journalistic environment on a daily basis. Administrators, however, lack in this area and it often shows when stories are repeatedly censored for the school’s better image.

After all, how do we expect the school, community or issues themselves to get better if we cannot share other’s opinions on what is wrong?

Does your school administration enforce prior review?

