



American Association of  
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# THE SCHOOL **Administrator**

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## **Guest Column**

### **Freeing the Student Press for Their Good and Ours**

*By Kathleen Klink*

**D**ate rape. Student homosexuality. Controversy at school board meetings. A parental challenge of the use of Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. These are sensitive topics for any superintendent to read about in the local media; it's even more awkward when the reporters are students, and the medium is the student press.

But students need to learn about these important subjects, and it's the responsibility of a good student press to provide information of value to its readers. All are stories our students wouldn't have seen if school administrators edited or censored student publications.

When a group of parents publicly opposed the use of Angelou's autobiography in a high school English class, reporters from SPARK, the student newsmagazine, followed the story along with members of the Cincinnati print and electronic media and later the national media. What should have been a relatively minor story turned into front-page national news as it became a symbol for ideological struggles in public schools everywhere.

At home, though, the ongoing conflict and the resulting school board decision were of primary importance for students who would be directly affected by the outcome.

When student reporters approached me about the book controversy, my cooperation was important. First of all, students and staff alike needed to understand the challenge process and to receive complete and accurate information about what was happening.

Second, as students became passionate about the incident, a connection with the student newsmagazine allowed me to help them better understand the positions of all parties involved.

Finally, even though we knew we risked being misunderstood or misinterpreted by inexperienced reporters, there was a greater risk in not being forthcoming. Gaining a reputation as being arrogant or

uncaring about the community is a sure way to damage the district's effectiveness.

## **Valuable Experiences**

So why should a school superintendent allow the student press to write about controversial issues that could be embarrassing to the school district? The reasons for supporting students' press rights are numerous.

First and foremost, my role as superintendent is to ensure that students receive the best possible educational experience. Encouraging them to have a complete foundation in responsible journalism fits that role.

High school journalism also provides on-the-job training for students who are thinking of becoming professional journalists. As such, they must learn to be accurate, relevant and objective reporters of fact. These are skills taught by our journalism teachers and reinforced by allowing them to write what they believe is important and to be accountable for what they publish.

Second, the unrestricted reporting by student journalists encourages the development of problem-solving skills, writing skills and creative thinking.

Third, in my experience taking the risk of being open with student journalists builds trust between the administration and students. As that trust develops, the quality of dialogue with students improves.

Fourth, supporting freedom of the student press demonstrates democratic values that are an essential part of a public education.

## **Learning Responsibility**

The best teaching and learning means actively engaged students taking full responsibility for their work. That's a practice embraced by our teachers, whether in mathematics courses or in journalism classes. Our journalism teachers and publication advisers know they can't have it both ways: The best learning can't take place if the superintendent or principal or any other administrator controls their students' output and creativity.

Of course, this doesn't mean that teachers, administrators or even other students are always comfortable with what they read. Stories published in the Lakota student press have stirred up controversy, created talk among staff and students and sometimes have been picked up by the mainstream media. Those kinds of strong reactions should be expected when students delve into tough issues and topics that affect their lives. Real-world stories can take different directions from those originally intended, and both writers and readers may be affected by the result. But when instructors create an environment in which students can research, discuss, write, draw and publish the truth objectively, all students benefit from the result.

Even when stories challenge authority or the status quo, those who publish them do so with the confidence they conducted thorough research, developed a balanced and well-sourced story and produced fundamentally sound coverage because that's what they've been taught and that's what's expected of them. In that context, although we may be uncomfortable with certain published stories, we know they have the same integrity that we expect from other news media organizations.

The bottom line is that student journalism is an academic pursuit. To fully appreciate what they're learning, students must be free to do their best and to be responsible for their work.

A journalism class constrained by a principal or superintendent might as well not exist. To control stories is to control free thought and free speech.

However, to provide a framework built around a culture based on trust opens the door for students to explore ideas, use the written word to expand their knowledge as well as ours and to challenge our thoughts.

That's a successful education, and that's why I support freedom of the student press.

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