

The Voice of Freedom

One school discovers that a student newspaper free from prior review and censorship gives students a voice, raises awareness of student problems, and builds understanding among students.

BY HARRY PROUDFOOT AND ALAN WEINTRAUB

We thought that we knew how big the alcohol problem was among students at Westport High School. We thought it was not as bad as national surveys made student alcohol use out to be. And we had implemented a breathalyzer policy to guarantee that all school social events, at least, were alcohol free. But then the *Villager*, our high school newspaper, did a survey on drinking. It showed us just how wrong we were.

It wasn't that the overall numbers were that bad—albeit worse than we expected. They revealed that our students were just about at the national average in terms of alcohol use. But the paper also asked how often people drank. And that's where the shock was. Some of the students surveyed—who took the survey seriously—said they could not get through a day without a drink.

The *Villager* ran the piece as its cover story that week and later ran an interview with a student who clearly had an alcoholism problem. At Westport High School, we can no longer pretend we don't have an alcohol problem. Our high school newspaper has seen to that.

Many administrators might see that last bit as a problem. After all, no one wants to see negative news items about their school in any newspaper, let alone in a student publica-

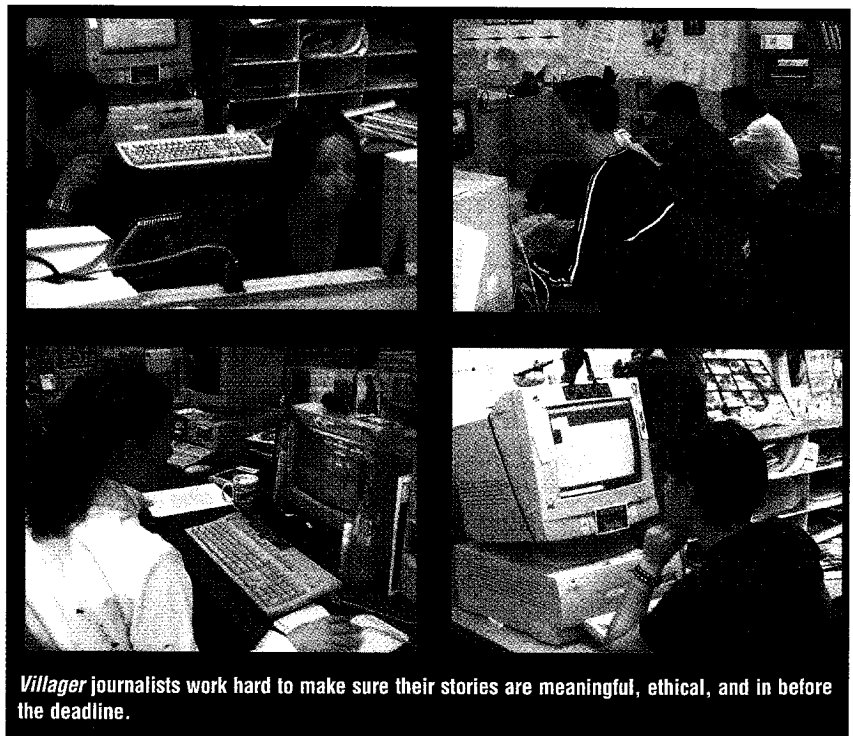
tion. Isn't the school newspaper supposed to be a public relations tool that showcases the good things that happen? Some schools even try to keep their student papers from printing stories about sports team losses.

We don't do that.

We don't censor the paper. We don't engage in any form of prior review. The students own the newspaper. They are responsible for what it says and what it does. What they decide matters to them and to the students who read it.

As a result, the *Villager* has become something much more useful than a public relations tool that no one either reads or believes. First, it has had a dramatic impact on school climate. There are student cliques at Westport High School, like every other high school. The difference is ours get along with each other. In part, that's because over the course of the year, members of every subgroup become the topic of some news or feature story in the paper. Part of the *Villager's* mission statement—a ▶

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Villager journalists work hard to make sure their stories are meaningful, ethical, and in before the deadline.

Photo credit: Andrew Pery, *Villager* photography editor.

statement the students decided they needed and developed on their own—is to build a greater sense of community within the school. The result is the staff constantly tries to

find ways to remind students of their classmates' humanity.

Many of the paper's editorials appear to have a similar aim. They constantly urge all of us to become

more respectful of one another. And they are as quick to point out our successes as our failures. Further, they reveal the issues that students confront. After reading an interview with a teenage alcoholic, a girl who has recently had an abortion, a boy who has tried to commit suicide, or a student who works 40 hours a week and doesn't get home before 11:00 p.m. most nights, it is difficult for any of us to ignore that students live complicated lives that have a direct effect on their ability to function in the classroom.

With stories such as these, the *Villager* forces school staff members to take steps toward improving students' lives. Equally important, the *Villager* is an avenue for open and clear communications about where students are coming from. More than once, items in the paper have made both teachers and administrators rethink decisions that have been made.

Not that the students' opinions always make sense. Sometimes their ideas are ridiculous. Sometimes a writer's opinions are so negative or idealistic that we wonder what galaxy the writer lives in. But even the most far-out columns serve positive purposes. Sometimes a writer just needs to blow off steam. Sometimes a column is part of the process of growing up—a moment of public adolescent rebellion that eventually leads to greater maturity. Regardless, we'd rather have the ideas in print in the school newspaper where the students can learn to harness their energy, anger, and intensity, than in an underground publication where that emotional angst just feeds on itself and creates greater negativity in the long run.

Of course some will argue that Westport is a special case. We are a small school—barely 500 students. We are a rural school—our town still has more cows than people. We are in Massachusetts—a liberal bastion that

SETTING YOUR PAPER FREE

The following advice will help if you'd like to put your school's paper into students' hands.

1. Talk to other principals who have made similar moves with their student newspapers.
2. Recognize that you can't ask just anyone who walks through the door to be the newspaper's adviser.
3. Accept that students are going to make some mistakes. But mistakes need to be seen for what they are: learning opportunities. If the football team loses a game because of the mistakes it made, the season isn't cancelled. The team goes back to practice Monday and tries to learn from those mistakes. Your newspaper needs to do the same thing.
4. Create an atmosphere in which people are not afraid to fail. Journalism is the ultimate student-centered classroom where students really are responsible for their own learning. Both they and their teacher need the security of knowing that even failure has rewards. At the *Villager*, we learn as much from our failures as we do from our successes.
5. Encourage risk-taking. Don't blink when the students want to do stories on sex, drugs, or gang violence. Remember that kids have a better chance of influencing the behavior of other kids than any adults except their parents do. If an article on sex prevents two people from having unprotected sex—or having sex at all—the piece is worth whatever worries it causes you.
6. Remember the school paper will help increase your awareness of the issues the students in your school confront. That will help you improve the climate of the school. But the student reporters won't be able to do their job if they feel like you are looking over their shoulder all the time. Give them enough space to really feel they own the publication.
7. Remember that the courts have ruled that schools are responsible for the content of their student publications when administrators engage in prior review or other forms of content control. They have also ruled that schools are not responsible for the content of those student publications that are not subject to prior review or censorship.

FINDING THE RIGHT ADVISER

The teacher adviser is the major piece in building a good school newspaper. You can't just ask the new English teacher to take it on and expect great results. The person needs energy, training, and what we call *the pioneer spirit*.

The first requirement is energy. Few people know how hard advising a publication really is. You are essentially asking someone to coach a major varsity team for 10 months out of the year with no breaks between seasons. Our adviser almost never leaves the building before 4:00 p.m. and is here later than that on production nights. Some advisers work with their students until 10:00 p.m. or later and then come to school the next morning to teach a full slate of classes. Advisers can't look at the newspaper as an assignment. They have to be psyched to do it. If you really want to see the kind of energy required, visit a school newspaper on deadline. What you see may surprise you.

The second thing that is necessary is a good knowledge base. The person must not only have good writing skills but also be able to communicate how to write well for a student audience. The adviser must understand the fundamentals of good journalistic writing, as well as layout and design, and have a good command of the legal and ethical issues involved in a school newspaper. But advisers do not have to have a degree in journalism if they are willing to learn how to do those things. There are plenty of national and regional conferences all around the country that offer adviser tracks. Contact the Journalism Education Association and the Dow Jones Newspaper Fund for help with these kinds of issues. Advisers can also learn a lot by visiting other schools or by being mentored by teachers with more experience. These kinds of things can be set up sometimes through regional scholastic press associations. Be willing to provide both the time and the money this training requires. You won't regret the expense.

Finally, an adviser must want to be a pioneer. Advisers must be willing to deal with chaos because they want to make their lives and the lives of those around them better.

The adviser's can-do attitude will transfer to the students and inspire them to put in the kinds of hours and dedication it takes to have a high quality publication.

cares more for rights than responsibilities. We have a teacher adviser with more than 20 years experience.

All these things are true. But our adviser has never functioned under prior review anywhere, even when he first started teaching. In fact, in his first year of advising, the newspaper ran a story critical of administrators for terminating three teachers. That paper went on to win national recognition in only his third year of advising in large part because the students' ownership of the paper made them want to excel.

In addition, the staff of the *Villager* is more concerned with responsible action than with rights. Students spend as much time explor-

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ing the ethics of their stories as they do creating them. Further, as part of school policy, every *Villager* staff member participates in a detailed discussion of the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Canons and Ethics of Journalism before they write their first story. Every student understands that with his or her right to freedom of the press comes the responsibility to use those rights ethically. And although we are a rural town, we are nestled between two of the most economically depressed cities in America. We have a significant immigrant population and our students' first language is as often Portuguese as it is English. In addition, there is a deep cultural divide >

between the working class people in the north end of town and the more wealthy in the south. Finally, although we are a small school, we have one of the poorest school budgets in the state. Teachers are paid \$6–7 thousand less each year than even those in the immediate area.

But despite these considerable disadvantages, the *Villager* is consistently ranked among the best high school newspapers in the United States. The students will tell you they win awards not because they set out to win them, but because they are doing the job of good journalists

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anywhere: communicating factual information to people in ways that will help them live better lives. They will tell that you they are successful in that pursuit because they have been given the tools they need to succeed and the freedom they need to pursue their mission. And they

will tell you that any school can have this kind of newspaper if they have the courage to give students ownership of their newspaper.

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ADVANTAGES TO ENDING PRIOR REVIEW AND CENSORSHIP

BY DIANNE SMITH

- It will return to student journalists the First Amendment rights that are guaranteed to them.
- It will ensure that journalistic standards are met, as long as the school district places a qualified, certified journalism or media teacher adviser in the program to work with the student journalists.
- It will ensure that a diversity of opinions, both popular and unpopular, can be voiced.
- It will teach the student journalists that they alone are responsible for their actions and that no one else will accept responsibility for their failures or successes.
- It will allow students the freedom to explore new ideas and concepts in a nonthreatening way.
- It will teach students the importance and necessity of critical thinking skills.
- It will teach students that their ideas have merit.
- It will teach students the importance of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, and will encourage them to honor and embrace these ideals as they grow into mature adults.
- It will return to student readers their rights to be informed in a nonthreatening way about issues that affect them.
- It will teach student readers that tolerance of other viewpoints is expected.
- It will provide a structured place for students to have a voice without having to resort to such alternatives as underground newspapers and websites established for the purpose of publishing censored materials.
- It will allow issues affecting students to be explored within the school community.
- It will demonstrate to students and the local community that the school not only teaches the concepts put forth in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights but also puts them into practice.
- It will open the door for new opportunities and awards for student journalists and the school that are not available to schools that practice prior review and censorship.
- It will provide the local community with a reliable, independent source for school news.
- It will lessen the legal and financial liability for content of the student media for the school and the administrator.

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