

HS NEWSROOMS ARE DEMOCRACY'S PERFECT LABORATORIES

By Emily Hood

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Student journalism has had a strong presence in Missouri schools over the past 30 years. At Francis Howell North, we are fortunate to have a supportive adviser and administration that have provided us with the opportunity to tell many meaningful stories to our school community. After a student at our school passed away from a heroin overdose in 2016, our in-depth section of the newspaper profiled the heroin epidemic in Missouri and efforts by the community to help those in need. Because we are lucky to receive First Amendment rights at our school, we were able to provide important material to a grieving community looking to make change.

A high school newsroom is the ideal place for aspiring journalists to learn the ethical values of journalism and get the chance to make an impact in their communities. Freedom of the press allows students to explore and share important stories.

However, in 1988, student journalists were denied full protection under the First Amendment after the Supreme Court decision of *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier*. This decision allows school principals and administration broad power to censor high school publications and restrict what is published to the student body.

Even in states where legislation overrides *Hazelwood*, many administrators still use censorship powers illegally on their school publications.

It is essential journalism students are thoroughly trained to provide a full perspective on issues and events. Student journalists need full First Amendment protections in order to accurately and fully report stories that range from depression to the firing of faculty and coaches.

High school journalists are in a unique position to connect with their peers. They are able to share controversial issues that affect teens on a daily basis. Under the *Hazelwood* precedent, a student could discover that classmates are suffering from drug abuse issues. They could want to write an investigative piece on the effects of drug abuse in their communities and resources available to those who need help. An administrator in many states could legally prevent this piece from being published purely because they fear the idea of bringing up drug addiction in the first place.

Because of censorship powers given to principals, many high school publications don't attempt to cover tough



topics. Teenagers with substance abuse issues could get help because of stories in their high school's publication.

Censorship not only prevents information from getting to the school community, it also stops journalists from checking those in power. A great example of journalists checking power is the Pittsburg Six reporting team from Pittsburg, Kansas. Through their research, the six staff members discovered their new principal had lied about her credentials when applying for the position. Their discoveries forced the school board to hire a new principal. If those students had not been granted First Amendment protection through state legislation and had to go through a prior review process, it is not likely the principal would have allowed the story to be published. Because the students knew their power as journalists, they felt confident in their ability to investigate and report.

The responsibility to cover sensitive topics can be a daunting task for a 17-year-old. The ability to quickly make tough decisions is developed with age. However, editorial policies for a publication allow for a guideline to follow in tricky situations. They outline specific procedures journalists must follow to protect all parties involved in a story. Editorial policies can help ease the worries of administrators and state legislatures. The decisions made by editorial boards can be based on guidelines rather than emotion. Editorial policies help journalists use their First Amendment rights responsibly.

Without First Amendment rights, student journalists are not able to do their jobs effectively and cannot provide their community with vital information about the issues they face. In a time where the media is constantly scrutinized in the public eye, the importance of creating well-rounded, ethical and objective journalists is growing every day. Work created in the high school newsroom can build a foundation of high quality reporting by students that can carry over into strong journalism careers for years to come.