

Think First

JEA
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Free expression
through
responsible
journalism

Statement in Support of Freedom of the Press

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“Impact, Excitement, Excellence in Education”

Were I writing a plaque to be hung over the door of the Kirkwood High School Journalism Department, those are the three words I would inscribe. During 22 years as principal of Kirkwood, I witnessed the impact our student journalists had on the search for truth in education and in life, the excitement which they stimulated within our student body, staff, parents, and community, and the excellence they helped us achieve in our academic endeavors.

Education that impacts engages students’ minds, encourages them to participate, even begs them to take leadership in the process. KHS journalism students ambled into their newspaper and year-book rooms on their first day and charged out at the end of the period with a new mission. It was a mission to be honest, to seek truth, to report factually, to air opinions of students, staff, parents, and community members in such a way as to build a better school.

The excitement came in the articles student journalists chose to write. I did not choose. The superintendent did not choose. We delegated the duty of teaching and supervising student staffs to the teachers trained in journalism. Those teachers reinforced grammar and writing skills, opened up a new world of journalistic methods, and dug deeply into the philosophy of the four cornerstones of professional journalism: (1) no libeling, (2) no invasion of privacy, (3) no inciting to riot, and (4) no obscenity based on community standards. The learning process was year long, but the stories began to flow immediately. They covered not only classes, athletic programs, assemblies, and school social events, but also fights and other disruptions among the student body, drugs and alcohol abuse at weekend parties, and the consequences of teenage sexual activity, including pregnancy and venereal disease. Students, staff, and parents read the Kirkwood CALL and discussed it among themselves and with me. There was delight; there was anger; there was interest. Often there was challenge, and definitely there was change within the school, within families, within the community. For instance, coverage of school fights helped decrease their number; articles on alcohol abuse closed some home bars. And when the school year ended, the PIONEER yearbook described the school year as it really was, successes and failures, happy times and sad.

Sometimes I was criticized, as was the superintendent or Board of Education. Sometimes I answered an article with a letter to the editor or spoke of a reporter’s story or the staff’s editorial on the school’s public address system. One year adult pickets shouted outside a Board of Education meeting demanding that the student newspaper void a contract with Planned Parenthood for an advertisement giving their phone number, because “the Call is obviously advocating abortions.” Parents said the dinner table conversation that year was meaty and beneficial to more meaningful family relationships. Teachers in Health, Family and Consumer Science, and Social Studies reported in-



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created student dialogue and better research studies.

Each year, as student journalists graduated, many cited their experience with the newspaper, the yearbook, or the television media program as their most beneficial educational experience in four years of high school. They had fun because they participated. They felt valued because their hours of research, writing, and editing culminated in published pieces which were respected as legitimate journalistic product.

In the end, the model of respect for the student press because of their engagement in their work, leadership in decision-making, and excellence in their product was the same model that we established for the culture of the entire school. Kirkwood High School became a stronger educational institution because the faculty, staff, and parents respected and valued the participation, leadership, and product of all its students.

Franklin S. McCallie is willing to talk further via e-mail concerning his schools journalism program--problems and opportunities. His e-mail is fsmccallie@aol.com.