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Threats to Scholastic Journalism: a Former Principal's View

*"You can BS a BSer, but you can't BS the kids."
John Black and Fenwick English, 1986*

I spent 22 years in public education in several roles: high school English and journalism teacher, student newspaper adviser, assistant principal, district language arts coordinator, and high school principal.

Now I teach in higher education and my job is principal preparation. I have been watching with much interest and sadness the increasing censorship of high school newspapers and reflecting on my relationship with the student newspaper in my years in the principal's office. Black and English's quote above represents my firm belief and respect for high school students and their role in scholastic journalism. It also supports my past work with student journalists as a principal as well as what I share with the future principals I now prepare.

High school kids are incredible. They bring a refreshing honesty and skepticism to our often dysfunctional adult world. Developmentally, they are designed to question and challenge. This is normal. This is healthy. It keeps us on our toes. The adolescent who questions and challenges is asking the significant adults in his or her life two questions: "Do I have permission to disagree with you?" and "If I disagree, will I still be loved and accepted?" What better place to allow this dialogue to play out than the student newspaper?

I had to make some tough, unpopular decisions as a principal. However, I was confident enough with those decisions to understand that a changing organization experiences conflict and that I could expect criticism. I well recall the student's request for an open campus lunch. There was nothing that could ever convince me to allow such a privilege because of safety concerns. It was simply not negotiable. However, the student newspaper freely and professionally disagreed with my decision. The result was the creation of a "food court" setting in the cafeteria.

On another occasion, I requested that the editorial board give me space for a column in the student newspaper. They declined and suggested I write letters to the editor. And so I did. And I enjoyed it.

Our student newspaper was the most popular publication in the community. If parents objected to an article or editorial, they were also encouraged to write a letter to the editor. Our publications board functioned for articles the adviser felt the staff needed input on, and this faculty, student, administrator group made wise decisions without my input.

What I sense now is increasing censorship of student newspapers with an emphasis on "Let's show these kids who's boss!" I would like to suggest that they already know who is boss. Our administrators' time could be better spent viewing scholastic journalism as the best way to incorporate authentic pedagogy and achievement into the curriculum. Newman and Wehlage (1996) conducted the most significant research on this subject and their model for instruction

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calls for students to engage in disciplined inquiry with real life applications in cooperative settings. What better vehicle than the student newspaper?

Sizer and Sizer (1999) in their work *The Students Are Watching: Schools and the Moral Contract* suggest that the most powerful teaching that occurs in schools is through student observation of adult behavior. What moral and intellectual messages are we sending in a so-called democratic institution when we censor student newspapers?

As a university professor, I attempt to prepare principals to create school communities based on trust and mutual respect. The best principals understand that to create such a community, they need a pulse on the feelings of students. The student newspaper can provide this information.

Student perceptions may not be reality, but sometimes perception is more powerful than reality. If students perceive they have no voice in schools, they will find a voice- through vandalism and violence. Principals who are so concerned about what parents think need to remember that students are their parents' first and often only source of information about what is going on at school. Students who feel they have a voice will see school as a comfortable place to be.

What I miss the most about the principalship is the kids grow, mature, and learn from their mistakes. I also miss what I learned from them – the wisdom and value of healthy debate, disagreement, and diverse opinions. I am a better person and a better professional because of my experience with scholastic journalism.

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