

# High School Student Newspapers As Modeled On General Circulation Newspapers Are Not Educationally Sound

by

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## ISSUE

What is the role of public high school student newspapers? Is the general circulation newspaper an appropriate model for public high school student newspaper?

## DISCUSSION

For too long, civil libertarians and educators have relied on public high school student newspapers<sup>1</sup> to play a role in high school students' education using the general circulation newspaper (e.g., the Minneapolis Star and Tribune) as a model. The general circulation newspaper and the special interest newspaper (e.g., the Catholic Bulletin) as well as their counterpart magazines, newsletters, fliers, etc.) are a vital part of our democratic society when they are free, and their freedom is properly supported by all. Generally, we believe that the existence of many newspapers in a community with different ownerships, editors, and reporters is good for a community or a country, rather than having few newspapers. In an educational setting where there is generally only one school sponsored student newspaper, a different set of expectations should apply.

What publishers and editors of general circulation or special interest newspapers do in selecting or rejecting news stories and editorials is not a proper model for public school teachers (which is what a public high school journalism advisor is), who must obey state educational policies and "provide students with access to a broad range of ideas and view points."<sup>2</sup> This Minnesota Board of Education policy also states that, "Individuals or

<sup>1</sup> Nothing in this document applies to non-school student publications such as underground newspapers and other forms of written communication between and among high school students. These are all protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and except for reasonable time, place, and manner standards may not be interfered with (i.e., censored) by public school staff. No permission is required for students in a high school to distribute underground newspapers or other written communication. Only the school sponsored student newspaper is referred to in this article.

groups outside the public schools should not be allowed to... determine which view points will be presented and/or avoided in public schools." Nor is it educationally sound for a teacher to indoctrinate students with his/her own personal views, or to provide students with access to only a particular idea or viewpoint.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is not educationally proper for a journalism advisor (public school teacher) to function as a publisher, editor, or advisor who plays a part in selecting the news stories which are covered or not covered and the editorial positions which are presented or not presented. The assignment of which news stories to cover - rejecting some, accepting others— as well as rejecting or accepting the sides of issues to be presented in editorials, is not an appropriate role for educators.

We must conclude that a general circulation or special interest newspaper does not provide a model for schools since the role of the publisher or the editor in such newspapers is to select from all potential news which stories

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<sup>2</sup> Adopted by the Minnesota Board of Education March 12, 1985. A Policy on the Freedom to Teach, to Learn, and to Express Ideas in the Public Schools. "Public schools must promote an atmosphere of free inquiry and a view of subject matter reflecting a broad range of ideas so that students are prepared for responsible citizenship."

"Public school personnel should: provide students with access to a broad range of ideas and viewpoints... However, teachers should not be allowed to indoctrinate students with their own personal views...."

"Information power-guidelines for school library media programs, a.l.a: "to provide physical access to information through... a carefully selected and systematically organized collection of diverse learning resources, representing a wide range of subjects, levels of difficulty, communication formats, and technological delivery systems."

"To provide resources and learning activities that represent a diversity of experiences, opinions, social and cultural perspectives, supporting the concept that intellectual freedom and access to information are prerequisite to effective and responsible citizenship in a democracy."

<sup>3</sup> Intellectual Freedom Manual, Fourth Edition, a.l.a: "In Article 2 of the Library Bill of Rights: Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval."

National Council for the Social Studies, Academic Freedom and the Social Studies Teacher: "It is the responsibility of teachers... (t)o promote the fair representation of differing points of view on all issues studied."

Minneapolis Public School Policy Manual, No. 6250-A, "Teaching of Controversial Issues": "The classroom is to be regarded as a forum for exploring the multitude of points of views relating to controversial issues and is not to be used as a committee to produce resolutions or to produce final solutions for problems. The teacher has the responsibility to bring out all the facts known."



are to be covered, how each is to be presented, and which positions are to be espoused or rejected in editorials.

The U.S. Supreme Court was aware of this when it affirmed fairness standards for the government-licensed broadcast media to follow in order to have a better informed citizenry.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, public high school student newspapers need to follow fairness standards in order to be educationally sound. The flaw in using general circulation or special interest newspapers as models for public high school student newspapers cannot be — corrected within the context of school newspapers—as they are currently and generally structured.

### **Fairness in a High School Newspaper**

General circulation and special interest newspapers are cherished because they are free of government censorship, not because they are fair. Freedom of the press is supported, not fairness. Securing fairness in general circulation and special interest newspapers would involve and require government censorship and control. To meet the "fairness doctrine" standard, general circulation and special interest newspapers would have to present all sides of all issues; present balanced presentations on controversial issues; and give equal coverage in editorials to all candidates for various public offices.<sup>5</sup> This is not the goal of general circulation or special interest newspapers. Thus, it is reasonable to question the educational role of a public high school student newspaper when it is modeled upon either a general circulation newspaper or a special interest newspaper.

In the educational setting the school newspaper should adhere to standards similar to the "fairness doctrine".<sup>6</sup>

Under this doctrine, issues presented must include a range of views on a topic, a reasonably equitable analysis of topics, timeliness in presenting

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<sup>4</sup> Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. F.C.C., 395 U.S. 367 (1969). In this case, the U.S. Supreme Court said, that the Fairness Doctrine and its specific manifestations in the personal attack and political editorial rules do not violate the First Amendment.

<sup>5</sup> See Red Lion, 395 U.S. 367 at 378

<sup>6</sup> See Red Lion 395 U.S. 367,377 (1969), The Fairness Doctrine states that broadcasters have an affirmative obligation to give adequate coverage to public issues, and that the coverage must accurately reflect opposing views. The opinion also discusses broadcasters' obligation under the Personal Attack Doctrine, which requires that persons personally attacked on the air are given an opportunity to respond. Also discussed by the Court, was the requirement that when one candidate is endorsed by a broadcaster, the other candidates must be offered the opportunity to reply.

different facets of issues, "fairness doctrine" standards of equal access for various perspectives, and opportunities for persons attacked to respond. The problem is, no newspaper, including school newspapers as currently modeled, can adhere to the fairness doctrine, and still look like a newspaper. Therefore, a new structure and method must be found to teach the skills which school newspapers have so far purported to teach.

### **Rationale for Employing the Fairness Doctrine in High Schools**

In public education it is important to involve all students in learning about, writing about, discussing and expressing opinions about a wide range of issues, controversial and noncontroversial. The written and expressive aspects are particularly important to enable students to learn to communicate clearly and effectively. As a major component of a school's educational program, therefore, it would be productive to have more issues discussed, debated, researched, expressed, and written about. A variety of viewpoints on controversial issues needs to be presented and discussed if they are to be educational rather than doctrinaire. Special interest and general circulation newspapers do not have education as their goal, and this is reflected in their product. Consequently, public high school student newspapers modeled on general circulation and special interest newspapers fail to meet both fairness and educational standards.

*Educators should not use public high school student newspapers modeled after general circulation newspapers to perform the educational task of presenting an equitable range of positions on issue.*

First, one must accept the-fact that a public high school journalism advisor, and/or a student editor, or an editorial committee of selected students, cannot compensate for the inability of general circulation and special interest newspapers to serve as an effective educational tool. The standard newspaper model is too inadequate for the many, varying educational needs of students and teachers. Leaving aside the issue of whether or not the school board is properly the publisher of the high school newspaper<sup>7</sup>, the high school advisor and/or the student editor have nothing in common with

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<sup>7</sup> Hazelwood School District v. Cathy Kuhlmeier, 484 U.S. 260 (1988), "On January 13, 1988, the Supreme Court announced its decision. In a 5-3 ruling, the Court held that the First Amendment rights of the student journalists had not been violated. Justice Byron R. White, writing the opinion for the Supreme Court majority, ...also stated that Spectrum (the school newspaper) was not specifically established as a public forum. Rather it was a 'laboratory situation' for a journalism class. As part of the school's curriculum, Spectrum was not intended as an open publication for student expression. 'Accordingly,' he wrote, 'school officials were entitled to regulate the contents of Spectrum in any reasonable manner.' "



the publishers and editors of general circulation or special interest newspapers. These are not published in order to serve as educational models for high school students, but rather to inform some people of some issues and views, and/or to make money. The goal of the high school newspaper is, or should be, the education of all students in the school. Even if high school advisors and student editors were free of bias, the general circulation and/or special interest newspaper is by definition an inappropriate model for school newspapers since they cannot meet the educational standards required of public schools and still be true to their publishers' goals. Conversely, public school newspapers are not intended to compete in the marketplace and their publishers are interested in carrying out an educational purpose so they can be educational. And to be educational they must be fair, as described above.

Second, in a major U.S. Supreme Court case covering the not too-removed issue of a government licensed media, the Court, in 1969, made many comments which should apply to a government owned and controlled newspaper.<sup>8</sup> If the public high school student newspaper is an educational tool of the public school board (and the Hazelwood discussion makes that point clear)<sup>9</sup>, then the spirit, if not the letter, of the Court's decision in the Red Lion case apply.<sup>10</sup>

If on the other hand, one believes that the public high school student newspaper is not an educational tool of the school board, then it is to be compared with either a general circulation or a special interest newspaper. In that case parents, taxpayers, and students may properly object to the use of their tax dollars and time for the propagation of unbalanced views with which they may not agree and which serve no demonstrable educational purpose. In that case, there should be no school-sponsored newspaper, and its non-educational role should be left to underground newspapers.

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<sup>8</sup> See Red Lion, 395 U.S. 367 (1969) said that "The Fairness Doctrine and its specific manifestations in the personal attack and political editorial rules do not violate the First Amendment. "The right of free speech of a broadcaster, ... does not embrace a right to snuff out the free speech rights of others." at 387. "It is the right of the viewers and listeners, not of the broadcasters, which is paramount." at 390. "It is the purpose of the First Amendment to preserve an uninhibited marketplace of ideas in which truth will ultimately prevail, rather than to countenance monopolization of that market, whether it be by the Government itself or a private licensee." at 390. "Otherwise, station owners and a few networks would have unfettered power to make time available only to the highest bidders, to communicate only their own views on public issues, people and candidates, and to permit on the air only those with whom they agreed." at 392.

The objective in moving away from the current model of the public high school sponsored student newspaper which is published by the school board, is to have more analyses, more research more investigating, more creative and critical expressions, and more writing about more positions on more issues than is found by design in either the general circulation or the special interest newspapers upon which school newspapers are currently incorrectly modeled.

The general circulation and special interest newspapers do not have as a mandate the education of student writers and readers. Student readers in the school setting and in activities under the aegis of the school board must be presented with the range of views and news stories on an issue in an equitable, balanced, and instructive manner. The teachers should insure that resource material, produced by a class of students learning to investigate, research, analyze, and write about issues, covers the range of views and should supervise the duplication and distribution of such material to student peers for their reading, learning, and reacting.

General circulation and special interest newspapers have not been assigned, nor do they assume, this educational responsibility. Public school teachers (particularly journalism teachers) must play a new, different, and enhanced role: seeing to it that more students have access to a greatly increased educational opportunity of researching, analyzing, editing, expressing, and writing about a multiplicity of positions and viewpoints on an issue so that

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<sup>9</sup> See Hazelwood, 484 U.S. 260 (1988), "The latter question concerns educators' authority over school-sponsored publications, ...that students, parents, and members of the public might reasonably perceive to bear the imprimatur of the school. These activities may fairly be characterized as part of the school curriculum, whether or not they occur in a traditional classroom setting, so long as they are supervised by faculty members and designed to impart particular knowledge or skills to student participants and audiences.

"Educators are entitled to exercise greater control over this second form of student expression to assure that participants learn whatever lessons the activity is designed to teach, that readers or listeners are not exposed to material that may be inappropriate for their level of maturity, and that the views of the individual speaker are not erroneously attributed to the school... A school must be able to set high standards for the student speech that is disseminated under its auspices standards that may be higher than those demanded by some newspaper publishers or theatrical producers in the "real" world - and may refuse to disseminate student speech that does not meet those standards."

<sup>10</sup> See Red Lion, 395 U.S. 367 (1969)



they, and their student readers prepare or receive an educationally sound publication. Public school teachers are encouraged to continue to teach the newspaper as a form of mass media.

New forms of communication and methods of duplication for school writing classes need to be adopted and used by educators to insure that such educational opportunities are readily and widely available to students. New technologies are now available which make feasible the production of multitudes of publications and presentations, offering more students more opportunities to learn more skills, vocational as well as analytical.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Educators, civil libertarians, and all others should:

1. Reaffirm their strong support for freedom of the press in regard to general circulation and special interest newspapers, recognizing that a free press is essential in a democracy and that government may not impose a fairness standard on these newspapers.
2. Vigorously protect public high school student underground and alternative newspapers, as well as other independently written forms of communication between and among students, against government censorship or restrictions except for reasonable time, place, and manner standards which shall be subject to civil court review.
3. Recommend that public school staffs encourage the development and expansion of independent student publications and/or productions, so that the school becomes user-friendly to student publishers of a wide variety of truly student publications.
4. Give students academic assistance in regard to learning how to investigate, research, analyze, write, and reproduce their own newspapers, memos, fliers, articles, other written communications, as well as, videos, electronic bulletin boards and other forms of creative and critical expression. Teachers should not intervene in the content of such student publications, communications or productions, nor would they be held responsible for the content.
5. Recommend that English teachers, social studies teachers, and journalism teachers cooperate to take on new and additional teaching responsibilities within the curriculum, to teach students how to investigate, research, analyze, express, write, and produce their ideas and views, and to learn how to duplicate them for others to read, review and react.
6. Recommend that teachers give classroom assignments to students to research, investigate, analyze, write and express a multiplicity of viewpoints about all aspects of a particular issue and then reproduce the total class product of many different essays about an issue. This presentation

should not be modeled upon the journalistic newspaper standard of editing-out less important positions, but rather should be based on the educational standard of having a broad range of views on a particular topic.

7. Recommend that students in a class be given assignments to write editorials about a variety of issues presented through a wide variety of formats or medias; for example, students should consider and write about all the candidates for a particular office, rather than producing one editorial supporting one candidate as is true in general circulation and special interest newspapers. These collections of student editorials should be duplicated and distributed for peer review and reaction.
8. Recommend that school library media specialists make available the widest possible range of materials so that students have the resources to examine, consider, and investigate a diversity of viewpoints and opinions, on various issues-and topics.
9. Recommend that school library media specialists working in concert with journalism teachers, provide a variety of appropriate technologies, and help students to acquire skills in using alternative communication formats and methods of duplication.

(The text printed above, "High School Student Newspapers As Modeled On General Circulation Newspapers Are Not Educationally Sound", is the Adopted Policy of the Minnesota Coalition Against Censorship. — Eds.)