



**Colorado
Student
Media
Association**

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TO: Colorado House Education Committee
FROM: Jack Kennedy, CSMA executive director
DATE: Jan. 26, 2020
RE: Personal story relating to the need for HB20-1062

Attachment J

Though I retired from the public school classroom nearly 10 years ago, my story can illustrate that even veteran advisers who have earned numerous state and national honors can be caught in the struggle between administrative pressure to limit student expression and student rights to choose content guaranteed by Col. Rev. Statute 22-1-220.

I was the Dow Jones News Fund National Journalism Teacher of the Year in 1993 and have received the top awards possible from several national journalism education associations. I am a past president of the Journalism Education Association and publications I advised received dozens of national awards, including the National Pacemaker award, often called the Pulitzer Prize of scholastic journalism. I have been inducted into two school Hall of Fames, in Iowa City and in Littleton, as a result of my work.

This is all to help you see that in December of 2010 I might have been considered one of the most decorated and public advisers in America. But all that goes out the window when a principal disagrees with what student editors cover. I was teaching at Rock Canyon High School in Highlands Ranch, and my students and I had created the school newspaper, *The Rock*, from scratch in 2004, which was only the second year of the school's existence. By 2008, the paper had been named a National Pacemaker and the talented and dedicated students had already established a national reputation.

My advising career spanned over 30 years, including the final 8 in Colorado. Whether I was teaching in Iowa City in Iowa or at Heritage and Rock Canyon in Colorado, my students often noted the easy access to drugs and alcohol, and often noted that this access didn't seem to become more difficult despite many assemblies and guest speakers and public service announcements.

It's not surprising that they would from time to time choose to try to make sense of this culture in their coverage. It was not the first time my students had taken on this sensitive issue, but it was the first time for Rock Canyon.

But the principal who opened the school had left in the summer of 2007 and a new principal took over, her first principal job after many years as an assistant principal. That first principal and I talked many times about student rights and responsibilities and he always supported their right to cover whatever they thought was important. He occasionally disagreed with their choices, and he would sit down in monthly meetings with editors to discuss everything from what disappointed him to topics and news tips he thought should be in future issues. He never pushed me to censor anyone. In fact, he was instrumental in me being chosen the first graduation speaker in school history.

The new principal had very different ideas about how much freedom of expression students should have, and a very strong opinion that it was my job to keep students reined in. She sat down with each issue of the paper and marked it up,

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looking for errors and instances where she thought the school was not shown in the "best light." She preferred to not speak directly to the editors and instead would call me in for discussions. We worked out an uneasy truce, so to speak, in her first year, but when the December, 2009, issue appeared, she became quite angry.

The in-depth coverage was on drugs in the school community and included photo illustrations that were staged to represent drug use. No students were recognizable and no actual drugs were being smoked/consumed. The images were designed to draw attention to the four articles in the report. I was called into her office and immediately accused of supporting, if not encouraging, student drug use. Those illustrations were powerful enough that questions of content become secondary. The principal found it quite easy to disregard my experience and expertise. She simply did not like what the students chose to report. I told her that I was also disappointed that it was so easy to find students to interview who regularly used drugs, and that the goal of the coverage was to point out the dangers. Her anger was not diminished.

Was the report perfect journalism? No, but high school students rarely produce perfection. None of the content was prohibited by our state law. Sources were granted anonymity, since students simply would not consent to be interviewed on the record for obvious reasons.

I was asked to reveal sources, but I refused, stating that I honestly did not know their names. The principal accused me of lying. I explained that I was well aware of my duties as a mandatory reporter as a state employee and that I taught editors to NOT share with me the names of any students who might be breaking state laws. We worked with the understanding that only student editors would know those names and that we had to trust one another. I spent considerable time each year teaching and encouraging high ethical standards and adherence to the law as well as journalistic standards.

The criticism escalated and I made the choice many advisers make, namely to protect my students rather than agree to censor or throw the editors "under the bus." I was forced to write an email to the entire faculty taking responsibility for not providing enough guidance to my students, and had a disciplinary letter placed in my file, the only such letter in my career. I was humiliated and angry, but what were my options? Advisers are tasked with the responsibility to teach and encourage high standards of English and journalism in our state law, but there was no language that provided me recourse when I defended my students. It is difficult to measure the effect of the principal's wrath, but easy to imagine that my students spent much of the remainder of the year avoiding controversy.

Things were tense enough that I opted for an early retirement that spring. Luckily for me, there were lots of opportunities out there for someone with my background and skills, including the executive director position for what was then called the Colorado High School Press Association, now CSMA.

But I had three decades of teaching experience under my belt when this confrontation took place. I had options. That would not be the case for the vast majority of advisers and teachers in our state. I often imagine how many critical stories are squashed long before publication by advisers who are well aware that if their students publish material the administration objects to, it will be the advisers who take the heat. You can think of it as a loophole in the law, I suppose, and I'm certain it was not intended.

It has been my goal for the past few years to see if we could strengthen our state law so that future publication advisers will not need to fear for their jobs just because they are doing what the law and our society asks them to do. We need to close the loophole.

I hope you will approve HB20-1062. It will not end the pressures on public school teachers, with much of that pressure coming from self-imposed challenges and expectations. But it will provide some clear guidance for where the adviser of student media sits in the complex relationship among administration, the community, and students.