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Letter of Support for HB 20-162

My name is Patrick Moring, and I am the broadcast advisor at Rampart High School in northern Colorado Springs. I learned early in my career that while the students' rights to free speech in student journalism are protected, mine are not. My principal called me in after we had covered an event for one of the clubs here at Rampart, the Dungeons and Dragons club. The students chose to cover it, as they do for all the stories they produce for our weekly newscast. The Dungeons and Dragons club is a non-school sponsored activity, and I was told that I had to step in and make sure my students never covered non-school sponsored clubs. I asked both my administration and the district administration how that was not in violation of the student right to free expression guaranteed by being in a "Tinker" law state. They told me that the students were protected, but I would be in violation of district policy if I allowed non-school sponsored clubs to be covered. This prevents our program from covering clubs that could be considered controversial as well as some that are just outside the normal school curricular clubs. These include a host of student groups that are a vital part of our school population and deserve equal coverage.

I was told repeatedly that any coverage would be considered advertising for these non-school sponsored groups, and I could be held responsible if my students covered them. I would be considered in violation of school board policy. I enlisted the help of our District 20 TV staff member Cory Morlock who was a board member of the CSMA at the time. He approached district legal, and while it was never put in writing to either of us, it was stated from admin at the district and building that if we wanted to keep our positions, we should stop asking.

That was ten years ago, and I have now been in the district 12 years. I am the Career and Tech Advisory team lead for digital media as well on the Colorado Student Media Association executive board. The rule is still in effect, and I now am in the awkward position of trying to explain this situation to new teachers. Jo Powell at Pine Creek was told this year about the non-school sponsored club district policy and came to me with the issue. I have no answers for her, and other teachers like her. The district is not in compliance with the spirit of the student free expression laws, because while they say on paper that the students are protected, they threaten advisors with punishment if certain groups within the student population are covered.

I write this statement in support of HB 20-1062. Without advisor protections, school districts can circumvent the whole purpose of our student journalist free speech protection. It is a vital addendum and is the only way to show districts that they cannot punish an advisor when he or she is promoting their students' rights as journalists.

Sincerely,

Patrick Moring
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