

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 2ND, 2016

TESTIMONY OF LAURIN E. GRUBB
BEFORE THE
SENATE EDUCATION, HEALTH, AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE OF THE MARYLAND
GENERAL ASSEMBLY
For a hearing on
“SENATE BILL 764: NEW VOICES OF MARYLAND”

Chairperson Conaway, Vice Chairperson Pinsky and distinguished members of the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share my story with you today. Though my experience as a high school Newspaper Adviser is, hopefully, an isolated incident, it is illustrative of how damaging the 1988 Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier decision can be.

I have been a high school English teacher in Maryland public schools since 2007, first in Anne Arundel County Public Schools (AACPS), and now in the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS). In the fall of 2012, I took on the role of Newspaper Adviser at North County High School in Glen Burnie, MD. The school newspaper had been in decline in recent years, with enrollment in the offered journalism course dwindling and the publication printed exclusively online, and the administration and my department chair expressed the hope that I could revitalize the program and increase student interest and participation in the program.

The first decision that the students and I made was to bring the paper back into print and distribute it to the student body. Though we had some funds for this provided by the AACPS Secondary Reading, English, and Integrated Literacy department, they were scarce, and we would be limited to 4 quarterly publications for our first year. Still, the students were extremely excited, and I shared their enthusiasm.

The students worked very hard on the publication the first quarter and successfully managed to create an 8 page document. My student editor and I worked hard to assist the students where they needed help and to edit the work they submitted to us. We laid it out, checked it over, and submitted it to the printer. I also sent the principal a copy of our finished masterpiece, and sent it to the school webmaster to publish on the school website.

The following Monday, I was called down to the principal's office. When I arrived, I discovered that one of the assistant principal's and my department chair were also present, and we were all mystified as to the purpose of the meeting. When the principal made it clear that he wanted to discuss the publication of the newspaper, I anticipated that he would be congratulating the students on their achievement and commending the newspaper staff for all our hard work and the long hours necessary to create such an achievement. Instead, he proceeded to berate me in front of my colleagues for the content of one of the articles.

On the front page of the paper we ran a cover article which centered around school violence and security. The students had brainstormed their own topics and then brought them to myself, as adviser, for input. I saw no issue with this topic, and in fact thought it very timely and relevant. The principal himself was aware of this article, and was interviewed by the student journalist for the article and posed for a picture, with our School Resource Officer, in front of the school mascot. We featured this picture in the middle of the article. What the principal took issue with was a quote from one of the faculty members which stated that, in her opinion, our school, along with all schools in Anne Arundel County, should have metal detectors installed.

On the basis of this quote, he said that the article portrayed the school in a negative light. He not only berated in front of my colleagues, he insisted that the student body never be allowed to see the paper. Since it had already been sent to the printer, he instructed the assistant principal present at the meeting to shred all the copies of the paper (there were approximately 600) when they arrived to the school. He further insisted that I present not just a draft of every article written by the students, but the brainstormed story ideas of the journalists, to the assistant principal and my department chair moving forward. These colleagues were to be given complete veto power over any story idea, and could veto any story draft, that they felt was controversial or portrayed the school in a negative light. Furthermore, I was not to share with the students in my class the fate of our paper, but was to tell them that there was an error with the printer, and that we'd have to send it to be printed again. He gave no ideas for how I was to explain running with a completely different cover story, or the fact that we could now only afford to print 3 papers, instead of the 4 quarterly publications we had been so excited about.

This principal had been placed at NCHS the previous school year, and during his tenure there we had already experienced a staff turn-over of unprecedented numbers. Many of the staff members who had left our school had done so unwillingly. The principal enjoyed a close mentoring relationship with the current superintendent, and was rumored to have a very free reign over our school because of it. Since the principals desires were in no way unclear, and since I didn't want to jeopardize my career, I complied and largely stayed silent about the entire incident.

Now that I have moved on to another school district, and no longer worry about the repercussions of my former principals sphere of influence, I feel that it is imperative that you understand not only how one principal can misuse his power of censorship, but how the Hazelwood decision gives one individual the authority to impede the first amendment rights of student journalists. I hope that this story will emphasize to you just vital the New Voices Maryland Act is and that you will carefully consider this experience as you make your decision.