TO: Education, Health & Environmental Affairs Committee

FROM: Karen Houppert, Editor, City Paper

Date: March 2, 2016

**RE: SUPPORT SB 764**

I urge you to support SB 764, which would create a commonsense, clear policy across the state that allows student journalists to exercise freedom of speech and freedom of the press in school-sponsored media. Further, it insulates school media advisors from retaliatory discipline for the editorial content of the school-sponsored media.

Let me tell a little story.

I am currently the Editor-in-Chief of Baltimore City Paper but until six months ago I was a professor at Morgan State University’s School of Global Journalism where I also served as advisor for the school paper.

In the spring of 2015, eight of my student journalists spent an entire semester building an investigative reporting package on sexual assault. In particular, they focused on their own campus which was then under investigation by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights for its handling of a 2014 sexual assault complaint.

Like all of the undergraduates I’ve taught, these students were afraid to pick up the phone and call school administrators in the beginning. Some of that is just shyness; it’s hard to call strangers. But some of this is fear. Students, even those who had experience at their high school papers—perhaps especially those, since they’d been subject to censorship under Hazelwood—were afraid they’d get in trouble if they challenged administrative policies in print. This has a chilling effect that lasts—into college and beyond.

It took a bit of coaxing, coaching, and reassuring students that they had a right, and indeed a responsibility, to cover campus news fairly, as their reporting revealed and not self-censor in favor of the “positivity” spin that administrators wished they’d present.

In the end, drawing on studies, these wrote about the difficulties African-American women, in particular, faced in reporting rapes at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. They wrote about the run-around students faced at Morgan when trying to even find out where to report a sexual assault. They chronicled the sketchy documentation of assault numbers the university was federally mandated to report. They interviewed survivors. One wrote about her own rape as a freshman.

They criticized the administration’s handling of sexual assault complaints, the lack of available information for victims, and the limited 9-to-5 hours of administrators tasked with fielding sexual assault complaints (most rapes happen at night, during times when no one was available to take complaints). They also quoted a school administrator who, as the chief judicial officer for Student Affairs handles sexual assault complaints, addressed an student assembly on sexual assault by focusing on the way girls dressed, saying, “We have to impress upon our young ladies that you don’t have to be a video ho to be accepted.” Their work ran in the student paper, The MSU Spokesman, and was later picked up by a local newspaper.

But for the entire semester, I had conflicting thoughts. One, I was incredibly proud of the great watchdog journalism these students were doing. And two, I was worried about the impact this expose would have on my job at Morgan. (I was halfway through my tenure-track process.) Always I juggled these two thoughts.

In the end, I was lucky. Fortunately, when the articles were published, my dean at the School of Global Journalism and Communication, DeWayne Wickham, protected me from any pushback from the administration. Wickham, a long-time working journalist and columnist for USA Today, trusted that I was “raising up” my crew of young journalists to do well-reported stories and simply shrugged off any response from the administration with the reporter’s mantra, “Freedom of the Press.”

Not all student newspaper advisors are so lucky—and not all students are so lucky.

The relationship between student journalists (and their advisors) and school administrations is inherently adversarial. And in that dynamic, school administrators hold all the power of retaliation and censorship. Of course they would like to control the content of student media—through censorship, if necessary—because they would like to control the positive image of their school.

That means the protected party in this scenario *must* be the student journalist, and her right to free speech.

Here’s why:

The only way democracy can work is with an educated electorate—and the two pillars of an educated electorate are free speech and the related free press. Along with reading and writing, which hundreds of studies affirm is the best way to hone critical thinking skills, the most essential thing students must graduate with is a profound understanding of their role and responsibility as partners in an effectively functioning democracy.

And that takes practice.

That’s why we have things, even at the elementary school level, like student councils and student governments and student newspapers.

One of my favorite education philosophers, John Dewey famously insisted as long ago as 1916 that students “learn by doing.” What he meant by that is that students do not truly internalize abstract lessons and ideas, they learn by practicing and implementing things, by trying them out.

The student press is an integral part of learning-by-doing (that’s why schools have student newspapers in the first place).

And if there is censorship, this is no longer a real world, learn-by-doing experience for students. It is a lesson in the power of the state to silence critics. It is a message to young people who are preparing to vote for the first time that truth and facts don’t matter.

If censorship of any kind is permitted in the student press, then student newspapers are no longer lessons in democracy and free speech, they are lessons in repression and authoritarianism—and they merely affirm students’ sneaking suspicion that they are powerless as agents of change, that democracy in this country is broken.

I ask that you support SB 764.

Karen Houppert  
Editor, Baltimore City Paper

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