

Hope Johnson's Testimony

Good afternoon, Madam Chair and ladies and gentlemen of the committee. My name is Hope Johnson, and I'm a senior journalism student at Taylorville High School. I joined journalism my freshman year, and I cannot even begin to explain all the lessons and values I've learned from my journalistic experience. Next fall, I will attend the University of Missouri to pursue a degree in journalism.

As a high school journalist, I have been taught the ethics of journalism. My advisor takes time to carefully explain my roles as a journalist. I, my staff members, and other high-school journalists across the state of Illinois know what is and what is not acceptable. We take our jobs and the responsibilities that accompany them very seriously.

We seek to find and to tell the truth. We seek to be fair and always tell both sides of a story. We understand that libel is not acceptable, and we would never consider publishing a story with malicious intent. Though we are young, we are taught responsible journalism. We hold ourselves accountable for each and every story that we write.

This bill ensures that journalism ethics are maintained. It reinforces the values that we already know so well. However, this bill eliminates the possibility of school administrators refusing to allow a story to be published simply because they don't like the story, or because it puts them in a bad light. It eliminates the possibility that a hard working advisor could be dismissed for standing up for what he or she knows is right.

The Society of Professional Journalists states in its code of ethics: "Journalists should recognize a special obligation to serve as watchdogs over the public affairs and government." The decision resulting from the *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier* case prevents high-school journalists from doing just that. As student journalists, we have the greatest insight into the workings of our high schools and its administration. In order to practice independent journalism, we should be able to raise questions about the decisions of our city councils, school board and our school administration. As journalists, we have a duty to tell the truth, and as Americans, we have a right to question and constructively criticize authority.

Censorship leaves people in the dark. Censorship steals our voices. I and my fellow high-school journalists feel strongly about our right to report the truth. And as the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko once said: "When truth is replaced by silence, the silence is a lie."