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BY EMAIL AND FAX

The Hon. Governor Gina Raimondo
State House
Providence, RI 02903

Subject: Support for Rhode Island House Bill 5550

Dear Governor Raimondo:

On behalf of the American Civil Liberties Union of RI, the Providence Student Union, the Rhode Island Press Association, the New England First Amendment Coalition, the Society of Professional Journalists, the Journalism Education Association, and the American Society of News Editors – all of which believe very strongly in the importance of a free press – our organizations are writing to encourage you to sign House Bill 5550, promoting student journalism.

Student journalism is the gateway to informed and participatory citizenship. Through journalism, students engage with contemporary political and social issues in a supervised and accountable discussion space, learning to have the civil, fact-based conversations that our current national dialogue so often lacks.

A survey of 461 high-school journalists by researchers at the University of Kansas published in March 2016 found that 38 percent of all students had been told that certain topics were categorically off-limits for discussion in student media, with substance abuse as the number one forbidden topic. Nearly half – 47 percent – said they'd refrained from even trying to write about a topic of importance, in anticipation of an adverse reaction from school authorities. For these students, the newsroom is a frustrating and disempowering place, where students learn a very different type of civics lesson: That you can't question or criticize the government, and you'll be punished if you try. Perhaps most revealingly, the study found that teen girls experience both direct school censorship and anticipatory "self-censorship" at greatly higher rates than teen boys, an experience with the potential to enduringly inhibit their willingness to speak up on the issues they care about.

House Bill 5550 represents a commonsense attempt to restore some reasonable boundaries to the oversight of journalism in colleges and schools. The U.S. Supreme Court erased those boundaries in its 1988 ruling, *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*, a ruling that unleashed what one law professor called "a tsunami of censorship" engulfing schools (and at times, colleges) across the country.

Statutes comparable to House Bill 5550 are on the books now in 12 states, including in Nevada and Vermont, which passed analogous bills this year. Massachusetts has had such a law for many years with no negative impact. These laws have more than 180 years' worth of combined history nationwide, and in all that time, there has been no indication whatsoever that students use their modest degree of legally protected freedom in injurious ways. To the contrary, these laws result in more substantive and higher-quality journalism, as students proceed with the assurance that the law will not permit censorship solely because their work reflects unfavorably on the public-relations image of the institution.

House Bill 5550 invites the discussion of substantive public issues into the newsroom and into the school day, where students can practice the civic-engagement skills preparing them for a lifetime of participatory citizenship. We urge your support for this commonsense legislation that will establish Rhode Island as a leader in journalism education at a time when journalism is sorely in need of champions.

Sincerely,

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cc: Bret Smiley, Chief of Staff