

PROSPER, TX — After three stories were censored throughout the year on Prosper High School's online student newspaper and its award-winning adviser was told her contract would not be renewed next fall, the student staff has taken a stand to contest what they allege are incorrect and unlawful justifications of censorship and severe prior review by Principal Dr. John M. Burdett.

According to Eagle Nation Online Assistant Editor Neha Madhira, she met with Burdett various times to discuss the controversial stories but was told editorials would not be published as they were incorrect, not uplifting and did not voice all 3,000 students at their high school.

When the staff members were told their adviser Lori Oglesbee was not recommended for renewal next year, students sent a letter to Burdett, the superintendent and the school board voicing their opinion on prior review, the nonrenewal of Oglesbee and why a newspaper should still exist next year, but received no written response.

Oglesbee, who was the 2009 national Journalism Education Association's Adviser of the Year, has taught her journalism, photojournalism and newspaper kids to win over one hundred awards this year alone.

"Student voice is extremely important to establish a newspaper. Every story we write is to educate, to inform or to persuade the student body. We should not only be able to report the truth but to stand up for what we believe in," Madhira said. "We are not just public relations for the school. Not all news will be positive. As for the editorials we write, they represent the opinion of the staff and both sides should be allowed to be voiced."

After censoring an editorial on the removal of a book from the sophomore reading list, Burdett told the staff they must send him anything controversial or against community norms to be approved. Because that order seemed so vague to the staff and out of fear they would be censored again, they sent Burdett almost everything.

The third story censored was on a team-bonding activity the school had on National Walkout Day, April 20. Madhira had approached Burdett the week before to go over the news story that went with it, which was approved.

Madhira wrote the activity that was supposed to honor lives lost, "was unfocused and chaotic on the east side of the main hall." She said one student screamed there would be a school shooting when students were supposed to exit their classrooms, another yelled the "Heil Hitler" song during the school song, and several held up the Eagle sign close to their lips making it appear as a blunt, aligning with it being 4/20, or "Weed Day."

She then said, "students need specific instructions, specific objectives, just like what is expected of classroom teachers who prepare an activity," and gave solutions to some of these "issues".

Burdett told Oglesbee who then told the staff members that the reasons for censoring both editorials were that they were not factual, should reflect the views of all three thousand kids in the school and not just the staff members and were not positive/uplifting to the school in any way.

“Censorship keeps our newspaper from covering all the issues that matter to us,” Copy Editor Isabella Abraham said. “Just because the opinion is ‘inconvenient’ for the school, doesn’t mean we don’t have a right to voice it.”

Mike Hiestand, an attorney and Senior Legal Counsel to the Student Press Law Center, a Washington, DC-based nonprofit that provides legal help to high school and college student media, said that Burdett’s decision to end Oglesbee’s contract and censor the paper is shocking.

“Prosper High School is blessed with a veteran teacher who was named the best high school journalism adviser in the entire country. *The entire country*. Under her guidance, the young journalists she has worked with have regularly taken home top honors. And how does this principal reward such achievements? He fires her and tells the students not to cover anything but happy news. Is this how you’re teaching American civics in Texas these days?”

Hiestand also had a word of warning:

“How’s your football team doing at PHS? If this principal sticks around you might want to throw a few games.”

For more information contact:

Neha Madhira
Assistant Editor
Eagle Nation Online
neha.madhira@gmail.com

Mike Hiestand
Senior Legal Counsel
Student Press Law Center
(202) 785-5450

Lori Keekley
JEA Scholastic Press Rights Director
(612) 636-3103
keekley@gmail.com