



Dear Adviser,

The COVID-19 crisis means that principals and other administrators nationwide are having to make painful financial decisions that cut across the entire school; you know from experience that student media is often first on the chopping block. And while the financial concerns are real, it strikes you that the drastic reduction to the student media budget seems extreme, maybe opportunistic, and unfair. You may suspect that this decision is motivated in part by the questions your students have asked or the stories they have revealed in the past. You know that the student media is the only thing left keeping your student body connected, and you are not willing to let that go without a fight.

We've got your back.

The single best way to save your program is for a chorus of voices including you, parents, and students to contact your principal and let them know why the student media matters and what it does for the students in your class and the community at large. The following toolkit is full of tips and strategies to help you in your advocacy. The toolkit includes:

- **How to Mobilize Your Network**, to help you decide who should contact your principal;
- an **Essential Services Letter** from the SPLC that informs your principal of the government's view of media as an essential service, and the SPLC's tips for maintaining that service during the COVID-19 crisis;
- **Talking points** to help organize your thoughts;
- Some **common arguments and suggested responses**, and;
- **Other tips and suggestions**.

Similar toolkits for parents and students, with added social media tips and guidelines, can be found on our website, splc.org. Check back regularly, as in the coming weeks we will be adding tools and guides for proactive budget advocacy to prevent cuts like this from happening in the future.

Here are a few things to consider before you utilize this toolkit:

- **If you believe that your principal's decision was influenced, in whole or in part, by the content of your students' work, contact the SPLC's Legal Hotline immediately.** Adviser retaliation and content-based funding decisions are censorship, and administrators cannot use COVID-19 budget cuts as an excuse to censor the student media. The SPLC's legal hotline is free and available at splc.org/legalrequest.

- **If you are unionized and have not already done so, contact your union representative before taking on any direct advocacy.** Your rep may have information or strategies unique to your area.
- **Before you advocate, be aware of and comfortable with any consequences of your direct involvement,** including the possibility you will be accused of insubordination or experience negative consequences. We know you are weighing the personal and professional concerns of pushing back against these cuts, and all of those concerns are valid. Remember that the advocacy need not come from you directly.
- **Be proactive;** you do not need to wait until decisions are made before you can push back, and it is much easier to prevent a cut than it is to reverse it. Encourage stakeholders to get involved if you even hear wind of budget cuts. The longer you wait, the more difficult this will be.
- **Consider whether the advocacy should come from you.** Your students and their parents may be better equipped to take this on - they just need you to tell them what is happening. For more ideas on who should get involved, check out “How to Mobilize Your Network.”
- **Remember that a little bit of advocacy can go a long way.** If you only have the bandwidth to make one phone call to the principal, tell one parent what is happening, or direct one student to the SPLC’s toolkit, that can still be the difference between your school having student media next year or not.

We know all you have done for your students; thank you for continuing to stand by them during this challenging time.

Sincerely,

The Student Press Law Center



HOW TO MOBILIZE YOUR NETWORK

The best way to save your student media program is for a variety of stakeholders to call or email your principal. It's time for all hands on deck! Each of the following groups has a unique perspective and strong potential impact. Keep them informed about the changes to your program, and point them to the SPLC's Budget Advocacy Toolkit for tips on how they can help save student media at your school.

Parents will have the strongest impact on principals, and are sometimes the easiest group to get on board. Parents have strong opinions about their child's future and academic program, and they have no concern about professional or academic retaliation for speaking their mind. Do not hesitate to inform parents directly about the cuts to the program, and let them know the SPLC has advice on how to push back productively.

Students can best speak to the impact student media has on their life, and what changes to the program will mean for their future. Many often feel that they cannot stand up to authority figures, so they may need to feel like they have your permission. Let them know there is an SPLC toolkit just for them.

Alumni, especially any who have gone on to be well-known in the community, are a valuable resource. Their support highlights the lasting impact of the program and can reinforce your arguments about the student media's role in defining the school culture and in producing well-informed, civic-minded adults. Ask any alumni you are in touch with to let the principal know what student media has meant for them both in the past and in the present.

Local businesses that advertise in the student media do not want to see their advertising prices rise or the publication - and their advertising reach - disappear. Many advertise with you because they believe in student media. As employers, they may also find valuable many of the skills student media instills. Let them know of the changes to your program, and how a call from them to the principal could preserve their advertising opportunity.

Community members who are not directly affiliated with the school are taxpayers, and thus have a vested interest in the programs the school supports or cuts. Any member of the community should highlight why they appreciate the student media, especially if your community does not have a local paper or if your student media covers stories - like education - the paper does not.



March 2020

Re: Student Media is Essential Service During COVID-19 Outbreak

To All Relevant Parties:

We are writing to affirm that student journalists, like their professional counterparts, perform an essential function in times of crisis and should be supported fully in their efforts to gather and report news on issues of concern in the community.

While it has become necessary to limit commercial activity in some forms as a result of the expanding coronavirus pandemic, commercial news media have largely been exempted from these limitations. Similarly, school administrators should exempt student journalists from any restrictions on student activities.

The federal government's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Agency (CISA) stated in no uncertain terms that essential infrastructure workers include those who "support radio, television, and media service, including, but not limited to front line news reporters, studio, and technicians for newsgathering and reporting." This definition does not distinguish between student and commercial news media, but rather recognizes the important role that all journalists play in disseminating news, precisely in times of crisis and exigent circumstances when such information is needed the most.

Student journalists have worked with university administration and others to inform the community about school closures, remote learning and other emergency measures during the current disruptions. While the CISA definition is advisory, a wide variety of states including California, Texas, New York, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and other local authorities have adopted similar exemptions for news media that allow them to continue operating.

It is important to note that supporting the continuing operation of student media is not a public safety issue as the majority of student journalists are working from home and observing appropriate social distancing protocols and required shelter-in-place orders. They are able to gather information and news by phone and email, check sources online, and work with their editors, advisers and fellow staff members through videoconference technology.

In recent weeks, student journalists across the country have not only written about the COVID-19 cases in their communities, but they have also provided students essential information about postponed classes or school closures, how and when students need to vacate their dorm rooms, remote learning details, campus resources that can still be accessed, and much more. In addition, they have had a front row seat to reporting on the experiences that students across the country have had as their schools have shut down and students have been forced to learn from home.

As of March 23, 2020, 46 states have ordered schools to close, affecting more than 54.8 million students across the country. Reporting on and amplifying their voices and experiences at this critical time provides an important civic function, helps to create a historical record and fundamentally demonstrates the vital role that student journalists play. Moreover, young journalists provide a unique and essential perspective at this time. They understand and can identify issues that older journalists might miss. They speak their readers' language and provide a trusted forum for young voices to share their concerns and have their questions answered.

Since 1974, the Student Press Law Center has worked to promote and protect the First Amendment rights of student journalists at the high school and college level. We are an independent, nonpartisan national nonprofit organization. We see the important work of student journalists every day.

The student media affiliated with your school are carrying out a constitutionally protected duty to our society by delivering vital information to the public. We hope you will stand with us as we support student journalists in their mission, which is now more critical than ever in the face of such challenging times.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Hadar Harris', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Hadar Harris, Executive Director
Student Press Law Center



SUGGESTED TALKING POINTS

***Your own story and why this matters to you is the most important and helpful talking point.** Speak to your years of experience, the recognition you and your students have received, the role student media has played in getting your students into college, and the impact student media has had on the campus or the community at large. Think about what matters to your principal. How does student media fulfill the requirements of Common Core, your state standards, or another framework your principal follows?*

In addition, the following points may be useful in supplementing your conversation.

- **The local businesses have also been hit hard in recent months, and many of those which used to advertise in student media will no longer be able to do so.** We not only need to refrain from transferring our responsibility of funding student media on to them, but ensure we stay on good terms so they will advertise with us again when they can.
- **Student media provides a service to everyone.** It is unique in that it provides a tangible benefit to the entire campus community and not just the students enrolled in the class.
- **It is our responsibility to produce civic-minded, critical thinkers who understand and respond to the world around them - exactly the students that come out of student journalism programs.** Fulfilling that mission should not be the sole responsibility of the local businesses that advertise with us.
- **Students should be spending their time learning research and writing skills, journalistic ethics, graphic design, critical thinking and leadership.** College admissions officers want student journalists because of these qualities, not because they know how to fundraise.
- **Student media is instrumental in creating community and establishing and maintaining school culture.** While students are dispersed and learning remotely, they need something to unite them - particularly with the sports season suspended. The student paper reflects and unites the experiences of everyone - the AP students, the drama students, the sports teams, the band, the debate team, undocumented students, low income students, freshmen, seniors and more. Protecting the student media ensures that we are a cohesive and connected community when we are able to return to the classroom full time.

- **Student newspapers and broadcast channels are a unique and important source of information and facts for students.** They have kept students informed in real time about COVID-19 developments affecting them and their schools, and are the only outlet speaking directly to and for students. Nowhere else can students see themselves and their experiences reflected in the news, or easily find information as to the actions their school is taking to keep them safe and educated.
- **Student media serves a critical fact-checking purpose, correcting rumors and conjecture circulating on social media.** Eliminating the student media only makes it harder for all of us to communicate effectively with our students, which is especially damaging when we are trying to keep them informed about how we are protecting their health, safety, and academic future.
- **While participation in all classes has been down during distance learning, a survey by the Journalism Education Association (JEA) has found that two-thirds of student journalists have remained engaged and active participants in their journalism classes.**



COMMON ARGUMENTS AND SUGGESTED RESPONSES

Avoid arguing, but feel free to respond to questions or disagreements. Some anticipated disagreements and suggested responses are below.

If I continue to fund journalism, I'm going to have to cut another program that is just as or more important. I know you are making difficult and painful decisions, and recognize that every program is being squeezed. Journalism is unique in that it impacts every student on campus, not just the students in my class. Now does not seem like the right time to leave our students less informed or less connected to each other by eliminating the student media.

The student media is not as important as you claim. I'm sorry you feel that way. I feel it is more important now than it has ever been. Certainly it is critical to the students who have been accepted to college based in part on their participation, or to the students who are at home wondering if they'll ever get a yearbook so they can remember the good parts of their school year, or the students who are checking on our website or social media accounts to learn whether or not they'll be returning to the classroom in September.

The student media has been problematic in the past. I can't speak to anything that has happened in the past. But the entire student body shouldn't be punished for that now. *[NOTE: If your principal makes this argument, contact the SPLC's Legal Hotline at splc.org/legalrequest right away. Adviser retaliation and content-based funding decisions are censorship, and our attorneys may be able to help.]*

Students don't read the paper anyway. The student press is the only voice speaking directly to and about students, and is the quickest and most reliable way for students to get information about what is happening at their school and to feel united with their classmates in this moment. If even one student learns about the future of their school year from us, that's important.

What should I say to parents who don't want other programs cut? None of us want any programs cut, and we understand the difficult decisions you are making at this time. We all want to provide the best possible education and environment for students, and student media is an important part of that.

The students can always fundraise to keep the program going. Our students should be spending their time honing their research and writing skills and growing into thoughtful leaders. They cannot do that if they are going from business to business asking for handouts.



OTHER TIPS AND SUGGESTIONS

- **If you are unionized and have not already done so, contact your union representative.**
- **Contact the Student Press Law Center legal hotline** if you think this decision is being made in whole or in part because of previous, current, or upcoming student media work. The SPLC legal hotline provides free legal services to student journalists and advisers, and can be reached at <https://splc.org/legalrequest/>.
- **Reach out to your state or national JEA representatives** for help and support. For more information, visit jea.org.
- **Write an op-ed for the local paper.** Do not overlook the smaller papers, including your local Patch.
- **Reach out to local organizations concerned with open government, civics education, college preparedness, writing, or journalism.** Examples include the League of Women Voters, 823National, Generation Citizen and the American Library Association.