



Dear Parent,

The COVID-19 crisis means that principals and other administrators nationwide are having to make painful financial decisions that cut across the entire school, but you've heard this story before. It seems the student media is always on the chopping block. And while the financial concerns are real, it strikes you that drastically reducing the student media budget seems drastic, maybe opportunistic, and unfair. You may suspect that this decision is motivated in part by the questions students have asked or the stories they have revealed in the past. You know what the student media has done for your child, and you are not willing to let that go without a fight.

We've got your back.

It's time to call the principal and let them know what the student media means to your student and why it should remain a class. 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 else 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**,
- **Social media strategies** to consider when talking about this online, and;
- **Other tips and suggestions**.

Similar toolkits for advisers and students are 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 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.
- **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.

- **Phone a friend.** The more voices involved, better. For 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, share your story on social media, or get one more parent involved, that can be the difference between your child having student media next year or not.

As part of the student media, your children are writing the first draft of history and we are proud to stand with them. Thank you for all you have done to support them..

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 for 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. Let other parents know 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.

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.

Local politicians may be reluctant to get involved, but their involvement can mean anything from a call to the principal, to public support of your cause, to legislation that ensures you're funded now and in the future. Contact your city or town council member and your state legislators - you're their constituents, and they should know this is important to you.



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



PHONE SCRIPT AND EMAIL GUIDELINES

A phone call is the most direct and effective way to respond. Use whatever phone number you have - assume the principal is checking their office messages. If you do not have a phone number or leave a voicemail, send an email. Ask for a phone call or video conference. If you do not hear back within a week, follow up with one more call or email.

If your principal feels the decision is over his/her head, contact your superintendent.

Phone call guidelines:

Keep your messages succinct and polite: arguing will never help your cause. Tell them what student journalism has done for your child and/or community, and what you worry will change if the program is cut. The phone script below is a template to help you, but your experience as a parent will be far more impactful than getting in all the right arguments. Remember to leave a number where they can call you back.

Phone script:

Hello, my name is _____ and I am the parent of (child's name), a rising (freshman/sophomore/junior/senior). I am calling because my child (is/wants to be) a member of the (newspaper/yearbook/broadcast) staff and I recently learned that funding for the class has been eliminated. I know that school budgets have been cut and that you are making some really difficult choices, but I am hoping you can find a way to restore funding.

As a parent, I have seen what student media can do for my child and feel there is no other program on campus that can duplicate this important experience. As a student journalist my child has [give two or three sentences on what student media has done or will do for your child]. Without this class, my child will lose out on [leadership skills, research skills, lessons about ethics, important relationships with other students, access to journalism conventions, scholarships, other extracurriculars, etc.]

I know that many difficult decisions are being made, but the student media is far too important to be eliminated from the school year.

I know you are very busy but I hope we can talk about this more. My phone number is _____. I look forward to talking with you soon. Thank you for your time and attention.

Email guidelines:

Keep your arguments concise, around 300 words.

Include your name, your child's name, and their grade or graduation year. Let the principal know that you are writing because you have heard the student media program has been canceled, that you understand the difficult budget decisions they are making, and that you want to talk with them about the student media in the hopes they can find another option.

Discuss the experiences your child has had or the lessons they have learned that could not be duplicated in another class. Let them know how you think cancelation of the class will affect your child in the future.

Ask for the opportunity to talk with them, either on the phone or via video call, about the student media program. Include a phone number and email where they can reach you.

Thank them for their time and work leading your child's school.



SUGGESTED TALKING POINTS

What student journalism means to you and your child are the best talking points. Discuss the experiences your child has had or the lessons they have learned from student media that you do not believe they can get elsewhere, and/or what student media means for the student body and community as a whole. In addition, the following points may be useful in supplementing your conversation.

- **Student media teaches all of the skills I want my child to have before they head out into the world.** No other class can provide students with the same leadership opportunities, teach them the same level of responsibility, or instill in them the same passion for observing and responding to the world around them. The student media allows them to practice writing, research, and critical thinking skills, and gives them an outlet to express themselves and be accountable for their words in a way that things like social media and classroom essays could never do. I want them to learn those skills - not how to be fundraisers.
- **Participation in student media is desired by college admissions officials.** Research indicates that students with high school journalism experiences have higher GPAs and ACT scores than students without journalism experience, and that the impact continues into the freshman year of college.
- **In times of distance learning, student media has kept the culture of the school alive.** When my child looks back on their time in school, it's the student media that will allow them to remember the good things that have been overshadowed by the difficult moments of the last several months.
- **Particularly with the sports season suspended, student media is the a common thread uniting the student body.** 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 all other students. A place where every student is highlighted and heard is the kind of environment I want my child to be in every day.
- **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 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 as a counterpoint to rumors and conjecture that run rampant online** When students don't want to read emails from their administration or listen when parents convey information, they can get it from their peers in a safe and truthful way we all can trust.
- **Distance learning has been a struggle, and any program that keeps students engaged should be a priority.** 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 responses are below.

If I don't cut the journalism funding, 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. I also don't want to see any other program cut, but as a parent I think the benefits of student media are too great for the program to be effectively eliminated.

The student media is not as important as you claim. I'm sorry you feel that way. As a parent, I clearly disagree and I suspect many students and parents do too. Especially now, there is no better way for me and my child to feel connected to the school community than through the student media. I feel it is more important now than it has ever been.

The student media has been problematic in the past. I can't speak to anything that has happened in the past. I only know what I need for my child right now. And certainly no past issue warrants using COVID-19 as an excuse to deny children the benefits of student media. *[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 skills my child is gaining come from the process of making the paper, not the number of students who read it. And the value to the students who do read the paper is high. 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. If students are learning remotely, this is an even more important function, to help keep the culture and community of the school alive. Students have a key role in that.

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 the absolute best for our children, and know you do too.

They can always continue their journalism, just on their own social media. Any parent knows that social media and journalism aren't the same. Our children need the guidance of an adviser and the structure of a newsroom and the rules of journalistic ethics. They don't want to just add to the noise online, they want to tell the truth and reach their classmates in a legitimate and valued way. They can't do that with social media.



SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

Social media is a great way to mobilize allies, but it should not be a substitute for contacting decision makers directly.

1. **Remember that social media is a valuable tool for raising public awareness, but is almost never what changes people's minds.** Use social media to broaden people's understanding of cuts to student media programs, what that means, and how people can respond - not to criticize or denigrate the people who disagree with you. Follow up with direct conversations with anyone you think should make a call to save student media.
2. **Do not assume that because a conversation is on social media, it is reaching the necessary decision makers.** If you have not already called or emailed the principal, do not post on social media. If you have already joined a social media conversation, call or email as soon as possible.
3. **Know your goals before you post.** Ask yourself: who are you actually trying to reach? What is your desired outcome? How will posting on social media help you achieve those goals? Is there a more direct way?
4. **Inform, don't argue.** Talk about why student journalism matters to you and your child, what has happened to the program, and what that might mean for your child's future.
5. **Be clear - always include your desired outcome.** If you want to see the adviser reinstated and funding protected, say so. Do not rely on your readers to assume what you want.
6. **Proceed carefully before tagging decision makers in your post.** Never tag a decision maker before you have reached out to them directly, and have a clear reason why you are tagging them. Being tagged in a social media post can feel aggressive and off-putting, so be certain before doing so that it will seem helpful. *Note: if you have left them a voicemail or sent an email, say so in your post so they know you have tried to reach them through other channels.*
7. **Be prepared for disagreement.** Remember that you are trying to change the mind of one person - your principal - and that you do not need to engage with every person who disagrees with you. If you do respond, be sure that your responses are making your arguments stronger or moving your cause forward. You will not see your program reinstated because you proved someone wrong on the Internet.
8. **Remain civil and calm.** If the journalism parents seem petty and difficult, the journalism students will not get their program back.



OTHER TIPS AND SUGGESTIONS

- **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.