



Dear Student,

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. And while the financial concerns are real, it strikes you that changing the student media class to a club seems unfair. You may suspect that this decision is motivated in part by the questions you have asked or the stories you have revealed in the past. You know what the student media has done for you and the rest of the student body, and you are not willing to let that go without a fight.

This is your moment to stand up for what matters to you. We've got your back.

The single best way to save your program is for a chorus of voices including you and your parents to contact your principal and let them know why the student media matters to you. 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](http://splc.org). Check back regularly, as in the coming weeks we will be adding tools and guides for proactive budget advocacy for you, your parents, and your advisers 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](http://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. The broader the support for social media, the harder it is for your principal to cut the program. 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, share your story on social media, get your parents to read 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 to keep your school informed and connected over the last several months; thank you for all of it. We’re with you.

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 your parents know what is happening to your program and that the SPLC has advice for them on how to push back productively. Ask them to get the other parents on board.

**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.

**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

*The best way to save your program is to contact your principal directly. This may feel intimidating but your principal may not really understand the importance of the student media to you or your community. This is how to change that.*

*A phone call is the most direct and effective option - we've included a script you can use as a guide. Use whatever phone number you have - assume that your principal is checking their office messages. If you do not have a phone number or have to leave a voicemail, be sure to send an email.*

*If you do not get a response from them in a week, follow up with one more phone call or email to let them know this is still very important to you.*

*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. Discuss why student journalism matters to you, and what it means for you that your program has been cut. The phone script below is a template to help you, but speaking honestly and from the heart is far more important 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 a rising (freshman/sophomore/junior/senior). I am calling because I (am/want to be) a member of the (newspaper/yearbook/broadcast/etc.) staff and recently learned that the class has been changed to a club. I know that school budgets have been cut and that you are making some really difficult choices, but I am hoping you have a moment to hear what the student media means to me.

[Give two or three sentences on why the student media program is important to you.]

As a club, we won't be able to [list some challenges, including: publish regular, quality work, do the same sort of thorough stories with feedback from our adviser, learn about how to request public records or seek out other sides of a story, afford the publishing fees, attend journalism conferences, etc.]

The student media is an important part of our school culture, and we have worked hard to make sure that we honestly reflect the entire student experience. We are one of the few

programs that impacts the entire school, not just those of us in the class, and I feel that the entire student body is worse off if this class is canceled.

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 - think around 300 words. Remember that your story of what student media (including your adviser) means to you and what you are losing with the cancelation of the class is far more impactful than getting in every possible argument.

Include your name and your grade. Let them know that you are writing because you have heard the student media has been turned into a club, that you understand the difficult budget decisions they are making, and that you want to talk with them about what the student media means to you.

If you have work you are proud of, or if someone else's work has particularly stuck with you, include it.

Ask for the opportunity to talk with them, either on the phone or via video. Include a phone number where they can reach you.

Thank them for their time and attention.



## SUGGESTED TALKING POINTS

***Your story and why this matters to you are the most important and helpful talking points. Discuss why you went into student media, what you have learned from it, the role you think it plays in your community at large, what your adviser has taught you, and what you will miss out on with the class gone. Think about the things that matter to your principal. Does your class attract groups that are underrepresented in your school? Have you won awards or received special attention? Has anyone from your program earned a scholarship because of their participation?***

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

- **Student media is one of the only classes that benefits the entire campus community, not just the students enrolled in the class.**
- **Student media provides unique leadership opportunities that make us better prepared when we head to college or the workforce.** We are able to practice our writing, research, and critical thinking skills in a way that few other classes allow, while also teaching us how to be responsible for what we put out in the world.
- **Having student media as a class means we can dedicate the time and energy necessary to produce good journalism without worrying that we are neglecting other work.** It also lets us participate in other extracurricular activities and work on staff with students who don't run in the same social circles we do, thus allowing us to better represent the student body as a whole.
- **As a class we benefit from the long relationship our adviser has with our vendors.** As a club we will have to dedicate more time to fundraising in order to pay for our product, at the expense of our research, writing, editing, and fact-checking time.
- **Participation in student media is highly 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 our freshman year of college.
- **Distance learning has been a struggle, and any program that keeps us engaged helps us in our other classes.** 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.

- **Student media plays an important role in keeping the student body unified, especially with students learning remotely and the sports seasons suspended.** The student media is dedicated to representing all students on campus, and our work ensures that we are a cohesive and connected community, which is something we need more now than ever.
- **Student newspapers and broadcast channels are a unique and important source of information and facts for students.** They are the only outlets speaking directly to and for students. This does not seem like the right time for it to be harder for students to 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 the rumors and conjecture that circulate on social media.** We prioritize truth and give school administration an opportunity to respond directly to the student body. This is particularly important when students wonder how the administration is balancing our health, safety, and academic needs.



## 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 don't cut journalism, I'm going to have to cut another program that is just as or more important.** I understand that everyone is in a difficult position, and I worry about losing parts of my other classes too. But we won't be able to make up for the gap left by student media by reading more, getting tutors, or taking supplemental classes in college. Every student on campus benefits from student media, and there just is no other way to get from it what we need.

**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. It's important to me because \_\_\_\_\_.

**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](http://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.** *[If you have evidence to refute this, use it.]* Particularly in the age of COVID-19, it is important for the information to exist whether or not we can quantify the number of people who access it. The student press is the only voice speaking directly to and about students, and is the quickest and most reliable way for us to get information about what is happening at school and to feel as if we are sharing this moment with our classmates.

**What should I say to parents who don't want other programs cut?** I can't say. I hope that we can do justice to their concerns and report honestly on the full impact COVID-19 is having on their students.

**You can still report, you just have to do it on social media.** Social media and journalism aren't the same. We want to tell the truth and report the full story, not get stuck in the debates that happen online. And we want the guidance of a teacher. We make a lot of decisions regarding the paper and the yearbook, but we are still learning. We want to learn journalistic ethics and how to write well, how to ask the right questions and find the right answers, how to decide what is news and what is just gossip, how to make important decisions, and more. We can't do that without our adviser, or financial support from our school.



## SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

*Social media can be a great way to find allies in your cause, but it should not be a substitute for contacting the principal directly. It can also easily backfire - people tend to get defensive on social media, the medium doesn't allow for robust discussion, and people can take your arguments and run away with them in ways that are not helpful. However, should you decide to use social media in your advocacy, here are some tips.*

- 1. Remember that social media is a valuable tool for raising public awareness, but is almost never what changes people's minds.** If you are taking to social media you must also be making phone calls to your principal and/or engaging with your friends and family directly to garner their support. Use social media to broaden people's understanding of cuts to student media programs and what that means, not to criticize or denigrate the people who make the budget decisions.
- 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 your principal, do not post on social media. If you already joined a social media conversation before contacting your principal, call or email them 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, what has happened to your program, and what that might mean for you and for your school. Use this opportunity to link to stories that matter to you, feature voices of other people, or highlight documents that support your position.
- 5. Be clear - always include your desired outcome.** If you want to see the class restored 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. 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. Remain civil and calm.** Your program will not be saved because you dunked on someone on the Internet.



### OTHER TIPS AND SUGGESTIONS

- **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/>.
- **Build a network of support among your peers.** Reach out to friends in other organizations who can help amplify your social media posts by reposting and expanding the audience.
- **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.