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For more information: Diana Mitsu Klos, 202-728-7267; dmk@splc.org

The Student Press Law Center condemns in the strongest terms the reported [suspensions](#) of at least two students at North Paulding High School in Dallas, Georgia who posted photos and a video on social media showing a crowded school hallway on the first days of school amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, SPLC is deeply concerned by reports that students and staff were told [over the school intercom](#) by principal Gabe Carmona that there “will be consequences for anyone who sends things out” that show the school in a negative light without permission including photographs or video, specifically warning of any content given to news media.

“Students must not be disciplined for exposing health and safety issues at their school, particularly in the midst of a pandemic. The school district’s policy related to cell phone and social media use on campus raises serious First Amendment concerns in and of itself. The extreme measures taken to discipline students who have exposed risk seem to undermine the policy’s stated progressive disciplinary structure and to chill the future expression of students or staff,” said Hadar Harris, executive director of the Student Press Law Center.

“In addition, we are extremely concerned that as schools begin to open up across the United States, that administrators are going to seek to silence reporting (formal and informal) by students. Schools should be on notice that students have the right to report responsibly and lawfully on the situation in their schools even if it is not the most flattering view of the school. “Any student who is suspended or threatened with discipline should be aware they have First Amendment and due process rights, including the right to appeal suspensions,” Harris added.

In the landmark 1969 [Tinker v. Des Moines Independent School District](#) Supreme Court case, which set the standard for student free speech, Justice Abe Fortas wrote, “It can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.” Yet at least one student at North Paulding High School was reportedly suspended from school for five days, even though the school district’s own policy recommends that discipline relating to telecommunications devices begin with “administrative conference to three days of in-school suspension.”



SPLC encourages students who are facing discipline for First Amendment issues to immediately seek legal representation. In addition, SPLC has a [free legal hotline](#) to assist. The identity of anyone who contacts our hotline is kept confidential unless they expressly decide to go public.

The Student Press Law Center (splc.org, [@splc](https://twitter.com/splc)) is an independent, nonpartisan 501(c)(3) nonprofit working at the intersection of law, journalism and education to promote, support and champion the rights of student journalists and their advisers at the high school and college levels. Based in Washington, D.C., the Student Press Law Center provides information, training and legal assistance at no charge to student journalists and the educators who work with them.