



NEWS RELEASE: SPLC recognizes BluePrints magazine with national award for accountability reporting on their local Georgia school board

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The 2020 Courage in Student Journalism recipient is [BluePrints](#) magazine at Cedar Shoals High School in Athens, Georgia, which pressed a local school board and newly appointed board member for honesty and transparency.

The Student Press Law Center and its award partners honor the work of Stephany Gaona-Perez, Brittany Lopez, and Jacqueline Wright. And when these student journalists were criticized and publicly ridiculed as the “Scooby-Doo Crew,” for raising uncomfortable truths, they had the steadfast support of their adviser, Marc Ginsberg.

“These young journalists braved public ridicule and stonewalling as they methodically pursued public documents and asked probing questions of a major institution in their community,” said Hadar Harris, executive director of the Student Press Law Center. “Accountability reporting is the bedrock of local journalism, and these students provided an essential public service by making their local school board more transparent.”

In January 2020, the Clarke County School District Board of Education held an emergency meeting to fill a vacant seat. Community activist Antwon Stephens said in his nominating material and during a verbal presentation that he was a member of the Cedar Shoals High School class of 2014. Excited that an alumnus and young person was named to the seat, the student journalists perused school yearbooks and graduation programs to learn more about him. There was nothing to be found.

The student journalists began a broader investigation focused on his fundraising efforts for a campaign for the U.S. Congress. They found that if he were to be elected, he would not yet be 25 years old — the minimum age to hold a seat in the House of



Representatives. And there were concerns raised about his previous fundraising during a past run for mayor.

The student journalists filed two open records requests with the school board, obtained individual student attendance and graduation records, combed through campaign finance records and contacted sources listed on the records, and pressed school board members for comment beyond their initial statements.

The trio of reporters demonstrated that Stephens misled the public, and their reporting detailed how the board failed to follow its own policies for special appointments. For example the appointment did not follow rules that required two letters of support.

BluePrints reporting raised questions about transparency and policies, and heightened public scrutiny of the school board. BluePrints coverage was followed and cited by multiple news outlets in Georgia. In March, Stephens announced that he would not run for a full term. He offered a public apology via Facebook, deleted threads critical of the news media and announced he would seek treatment for mental health issues. The stories and editorials published by BluePrints students conveyed compassion for his problems, but also demanded accountability over his appointment.

BluePrints adviser Ginsberg noted, “The work that BluePrints students conducted while reporting the story was absolutely necessary, and without it, the community may not have learned the truth about the board appointee's claims as well as the questions surrounding his fundraising. I knew that their work would not be well received by everyone, but I also did not fully anticipate the controversy it stirred locally.”

“Ultimately, the students learned that their work really matters, and the pride they took in seeing that play out—even while adults questioned and criticized them—has rubbed off on the entire staff and continues to elevate current projects or communications that students now take more seriously.”

Stephens, who earlier called out the "vulture press," eventually gave the young journalists their due. He told the Athens Banner-Herald in March, “These students don’t deserve to be battered simply because they are rising as young journalists in our community.”



The Courage in Student Journalism award is jointly sponsored by the [Student Press Law Center](#), the [Center for Scholastic Journalism](#) at Kent State University, which provides the \$1,000 prize to BluePrints, and the [National Scholastic Press Association](#). The award is being presented on Nov. 21 at 2 p.m. EST during the virtual [National High School Journalism Convention](#).

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 support, promote and defend 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.