

splc in 2020

Decisive action to meet unexpected challenges

GLOBAL PANDEMIC



In the span of two weeks in March, more than 56 million students moved to learning remotely, and the world of student journalism shifted completely. The Student Press Law Center shifted with it.

In a matter of days, SPLC produced an extensive guide to covering the coronavirus, followed shortly after by an even more comprehensive **COVID-19 Toolkit** answering student journalists' and advisers' top legal questions, providing a letter explaining why student media meet the legal definition of an essential service, and supplying tools to fight stonewalling on important covid information, censorship and even financial threats to student media.

During summer, our attorneys didn't experience the usual slowdown in calls to our

free legal hotline – instead they were busy fielding calls about censorship and access issues, and teaching media law through our **Virtual Speakers Bureau**, which reached 1,551 students in 29 states in 2020.

We engaged a diverse group of future media attorneys through our **Summer Media Law and Policy Institute**, where underrepresented law students received training grounded in practical exercise and a moot court competition judged by several distinguished federal judges.

Throughout the year, SPLC highlighted

student work, and told the stories of how student journalists were affected by the pandemic – high schoolers who finished yearbooks on laptops

from their school parking lot so they could utilize the school's servers; the student who told us "Everyone I know has had their internships canceled"; advisers concerned by lack of information and insufficient PPE

during back to school; and both college and high school students faced debilitating budget cuts.



PROTESTS AND TARGETING

Summer is normally a slow season for student journalism, but not in 2020. High schooler Eddy Binford-Ross (pictured showing munition canisters that were thrown at her) was repeatedly targeted, tear gassed, and subjected to flash bangs from police and federal agents while covering daily racial justice protests in Portland, Oregon.

She wasn't alone. Student journalists of all ages



from all over the country faced unprecedented police violence while covering these protests. To help, SPLC mobilized more than 40 attorneys around the country to stand by for **pro bono rapid response representation** in the event that student journalists were detained or arrested. Within hours of the first meeting of the legal network, a student in California required

representation, which we were able to quickly provide.

Through our **Guide to Covering Protests**, SPLC provided new resources to prepare students for the worst, including tips for staying safe in the field and how to identify yourself as press to police.

We also **publicly condemned attacks** on student and professional journalists in Ohio, Virginia, Minnesota and California and attempts to suppress student speech in Georgia.

\$\$\$ STUDENT MEDIA FINANCIAL CRISIS

Student journalism was already in financial trouble before the pandemic, but the economic downturn and dire funding constraints at schools nationwide has accelerated this crisis. Even worse, we've seen schools use budget cuts as a form of censorship against "troublesome" student news outlets that have exposed less-than-flattering stories about their school.

SPLC recognizes that this threat to the very survival of student media is inherently connected to our mission to protect and defend student journalists and advisers' rights. So, we worked with experts to create a series of tools and strategies for high school and college journalists to fight cuts and diversify funding, while also creating a **Student Media Budget (and Program) Cut Tracker** to help us better

understand and communicate patterns and trends in these cuts.

Our **College Media Financial Survival Guide** presents concrete, effective practices to assist college media in transitioning and expanding their financial base to ensure sustainability. The report is a distillation of expert advice from a variety of sources working in local media, college journalism, philanthropy and business. It seeks to infuse the expertise of those who work with emerging and legacy local news organizations with the best ideas emerging in college media.

Our **High School Budget Advocacy Toolkit** provides targeted strategies for key groups of activists (teachers, students and parents) in the event of budget cuts, complete removal of funding, removal of the adviser, cancellation of a class, or reclassifying a class as a club. It includes letter templates, speaking points, arguments and tips to mobilizing others.

These resources are all readily available in a comprehensive Financial Survival Strategies hub on our website. And, as always, SPLC's attorneys provide direct assistance with any censorship concern, including budget cuts, through our **free legal hotline**.



NEW VOICES



The pandemic shut down not only schools, but legislatures in spring 2020. This temporarily undercut the momentum of New Voices in states where bills were being considered.

New Voices is a student-powered nonpartisan grassroots movement of state-based activists who seek to protect student press freedom with state laws. These laws counteract the impact of the 1988 *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier* Supreme Court decision, which dramatically changed the balance of student press rights. New Voices supporters include advocates in



law, education, journalism and civics who want schools and colleges to be more welcoming places for student voices.

SPLC staff worked with advocates through this unexpected challenge to make sure the interrupted session wouldn't set back the movement. In fact, everywhere that New Voices bills were considered in 2020, they advanced – through committees, full legislatures and even new laws adopted. The disrupted session gave SPLC time to focus on two strategies: creating new

opportunities for students to lead the push for student journalists' rights in their states; and creating implementation materials to use in states which have adopted New Voices laws to make sure states with these laws are abiding by them to truly protect students' rights.

In July, we gathered motivated high school advocates from key New Voices states for our **New Voices Leadership and Training Institute**, (pictured to the left) where students developed their leadership and organizing skills, expanded their role as leaders within the New Voices movement, and developed an outreach strategy for their state's New Voices efforts.