SPLC's Impact: Three Years in Review

2019 — 2022
Contents

● **Background**
  Student Journalists Have Played a Unique Role
  New Threats to Student Journalism and Education are Rapidly Emerging

● **SPLC Programmatic Highlights**
  Creation of Legal Resources and Rapid Response Team
  Expansion of SPLC Organizing and Advocacy to Expand Press Freedom Rights
  Confronting Broad New Threats to Student Journalism and Journalism Education
  Expanding SPLC’s Advocacy Beyond State-Based New Voices Legislation
  Launch of Robust Implementation/Know Your Rights Programs in New Voices States
  Strengthening Existing New Voices Laws; Encouraging Smart Laws Rather Than Fast Laws
  Growth and Institutionalization of Student Press Freedom Day
  Creation of Training Institutes and Opportunities
    Summer Media Law and Policy
    Global Press Freedom Institute
    New Voices Student Leaders Institute
    Austin Independent School District Trainings
    SPLC in the Classroom
    Weighing in with Amicus Briefs on Key Legal Issues

● **Upgrading of Operational Capacity and Remote Staffing**
  Diversification of Board of Directors and Launch of Internal IDEA Initiative
  Adoption of Adaptive Strategic Plan

● **What Have We Learned And Where Are We Going?**
Background

This report covers an extraordinary three academic year period from fall 2019 to spring 2022, wherein SPLC expanded its budget, staff, strategy and impact despite the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and new attacks on student press freedom. As the only organization in the United States focused solely on supporting, promoting and defending the First Amendment and free expression rights of student journalists and their advisers, SPLC has been challenged and transformed during this period.

Student Journalists Have Played a Unique Role

During a period of pandemic, protests and attacks on the press, the role of student journalists has changed, and SPLC has innovated to provide support and legal assistance. Student journalists had unique access and reported from the front line as more than 72 million students from the primary through university level were instantly thrust into remote learning when schools closed in March 2020. SPLC provided legal and strategic support as they valiantly reported on COVID rates (despite widespread efforts to block access to information) and provided vitally important reporting as schools started to open again, exposing dangerous health situations, questioning masking policies, reporting on the impact of the pandemic on student mental health, and exploring learning loss. SPLC also provided early guidance about how to reinvent economic models for student media in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, SPLC created tools and provided legal support to student journalists reporting on youth-led racial justice protests following the murder of George Floyd, and as they continue to report on the impact of gun violence on students and in schools. Student journalists also reported in the lead up to and aftermath of an election that saw one of the largest turnouts of voters aged 18–24 in history.

Over these three years, SPLC supported student journalists as they filled news deserts and took on larger roles in providing vital information about school boards, town halls and statehouses. Indeed, a May 2022 study from the Pew Research Center quantified the impact of student journalists by finding that one out of 10 statehouse reporters were student journalists, and in some places the rate was much higher (e.g., Nebraska (58%), Maryland (25%), West Virginia (29%) and Louisiana (26%)).

And all of this has led up to where we are today. There has never been a moment when support and defense of student journalists has been more important.
New Threats to Student Journalism and Education are Rapidly Emerging

Despite playing the important roles outlined above (or maybe because of doing so), student journalists are now facing existential threats from state legislatures, school boards and activist parents’ rights groups, all of whom seek to shut down discussion of what they deem to be “controversial” or “divisive” topics. Hazelwood restrictions\(^1\) are no longer the only or biggest threat to independent student journalism and editorial control. After years of attacks on press freedom in the general public discourse, student journalism is now also under attack from the educational culture wars.

Throughout 2022, as efforts to impose educational gag orders exploded across the country, SPLC has tracked bills, intervened in public debate and supported and counseled student journalists as they consider the impact of regressive “prohibited concepts” legislation. These laws, including but not limited to bills opposing critical race theory, constrain curricular choices and the ability of teachers to cover certain “divisive concepts” in classrooms. What has been lost in the discussion about such bills is the fact that such legislation may create a direct threat to student journalism and journalism education, due to vaguely written and broadly construed restrictions on school-sponsored materials (which could include independent student media). SPLC has weighed in on particularly egregious proposals in states like South Carolina and Tennessee.

More directly, SPLC is supporting student journalists as they struggle against the chilling effect and an increase of censorship of any issues deemed controversial, even if such “prohibited concepts” laws do not apply. This was clearly on display in two examples from May 2022 alone, including the attempted censoring of a yearbook spread with Gay Pride flags in Florida (described further below) and the shutting of an award-winning student newspaper in Nebraska. We have focused attention on self-censorship and provided skills training through Student Press Freedom Day to help bolster young journalists’ resolve to report bravely on important issues that will contribute to civic life.

In light of recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions, we anticipate that the tension between student journalists’ efforts to write about issues of direct concern to their community (like teen pregnancy, abortion access and health care, gun violence, religion in schools and/or climate change) may be even more directly constrained. SPLC is closely monitoring how this is playing out, particularly in states like North Dakota, Arkansas and Iowa, which have New Voices student press freedom

\(^1\) In 1988, the U.S. Supreme Court, in Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier, famously stated that “Educators do not offend the First Amendment by exercising editorial control over the style and content of student speech in school-sponsored expressive activities so long as their actions are reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns.” This vague and overbroad standard carved out a free speech exception for student journalists and has resulted in school administrators censoring student work which might be embarrassing or controversial.
protections and have also recently adopted “Prohibited Concepts” restrictions. This will be more fully elaborated upon below.

We could not have imagined all that would change during this period and the way that SPLC would need to adapt and evolve to serve our mission. We could not anticipate the ruptures and reinvention caused by the pandemic, nor could we anticipate the multiple pressures facing education, free speech, young people and civic engagement with which student journalists now contend. This three-year period has been a time of pivoting, reinvention, creative engagement and opportunity, all of which SPLC has embraced. We have come through stronger and while our work has always been important, today there is an immediate urgency and enhanced relevance to our work.

The following report provides a short summary of the most impactful projects, most important organizational developments and most profound lessons learned over the course of this three-year period.
SPLC Programmatic Highlights

From 2019 to 2022, SPLC grew in breadth, depth and impact, focusing programmatic activities around the expansion and responsiveness of our free legal hotline and online educational resources for student journalists, as well as reframing, evolving and dramatically transforming our advocacy and organizing work. During this time, we also established Student Press Freedom Day (an SPLC creation) as an institutionalized national day of action to celebrate and elevate the work of student journalists. Highlights of SPLC's activities follow.

Creation of Responsive Legal Resources and Rapid Response Legal Team

SPLC's free legal hotline is the historic core of our work and the direct front line for student journalists to get help fighting cases of censorship, obtain legal support or have their media law questions answered. SPLC provides training and education about student journalists’ legal rights and strategic advice to assist in cases of censorship.

Over these three years, the hotline has handled thousands of inquiries, via phone, Zoom and email. The hotline is supported by a professional group of SPLC staff attorneys and a cadre of nearly 300 pro bono media law attorneys who are available to take on cases that require direct representation or specialized knowledge.

In light of the rapidly changing landscape and specific needs identified through hotline callers, SPLC recruited a team of volunteer attorneys across the country specifically to be on standby and to respond immediately if student journalists have trouble while covering protests or demonstrations. This Rapid Response Legal Team was created to support student journalists covering walkouts and protests focused on gun violence, racial justice and, more recently, the abortion debate and Florida's Parental Rights in Education law (also known as the “Don't Say Gay” law). Among its various interventions, the Rapid Response Legal Team was able to secure pro bono representation for a student photojournalist in Los Angeles who was arrested and had his equipment confiscated while covering protests following the murder of George Floyd. (That representation eventually led to a $90,000 settlement for the student journalist from the County of Los Angeles.)
In addition to the hotline, SPLC has rolled out a wide range of proactive toolkits to help student journalists with their coverage of emerging issues. The SPLC Coronavirus Reporting Toolkit launched on March 24, 2020, as the pandemic lockdown was just beginning. The toolkit includes an Essential Services letter, which reinforces the integral role that student journalists — like all journalists — play in reporting through crises. The toolkit also contains legal FAQs about reporting during this time, coverage guides and more. Rolling out within days of schools closing, the Toolkit was an extremely well received set of resources and was accessed widely on our website. The Essential Services letter itself had more than 7,000 unique page views in the first several months, and we know anecdotally that it was used by many students and advisers. The Toolkit, as a whole, is one of the most highly visited parts of the SPLC website, ever.

In addition, SPLC quickly developed a responsive resource hub for financial survival strategies for college newspapers as they were forced to suddenly reinvent their revenue streams when abruptly moving online during the pandemic. While additional resources from other organizations have since been developed (particularly those that work on business models for collegiate media), SPLC’s report — "Nothing is Going Back to the Way it Was: Creating Economic Sustainability for College Media in 2020 and Beyond." — was the first of its kind to help collegiate journalists reconsider their financial models in the context of the pandemic.

As racial justice protests began in early summer 2020, new challenges emerged for student journalists that SPLC helped to address. In addition to exploring the role that organizations, institutions and individuals play in systemic racism, student journalists covered mass protests and uprisings around the country. SPLC created a new set of tools to help student journalists understand the risks and safety protocols to ensure they could cover the stories well, including 20 tips to stay safe and guidance regarding how student journalists can communicate to law enforcement that they are journalists. These resources have been updated and expanded as student journalists cover protests about gun violence in schools, election results, educational gag orders and a variety of topics that continue to affect young people.

More recently, as wide ranging “prohibited concepts” bills and laws have rolled out across the country, SPLC has developed early FAQs on how these Prohibited Concepts regulations may impact student journalists. More materials relevant to these new pressures are currently in development.
While these responsive resources have been important, it should also be noted that during this period, we have seen a significant shift in one category of inquiries coming into SPLC’s free legal hotline: requests for pre-publication review. In the era of the #MeToo movement, student journalists are emboldened to engage in deeper, more sophisticated investigative journalism around sexual misconduct on campus or in the community (like the four-month investigation by the Rocky Mountain Collegian staff of the sexual misconduct of a now-former professor at the college.) They also have engaged in deeper investigations of financial or operational misconduct on campus. Often, they (quite wisely) seek pre-publication review from SPLC to reduce their risks of publishing. SPLC staff attorneys continue to provide such services free of charge and as expeditiously as possible.

Most importantly, SPLC’s free legal hotline continued to field inquiries from thousands of student journalists and advisers, working to answer their legal questions and support them in crisis situations of censorship. And as we did so, we considered how we could most effectively leverage SPLC’s other resources to not only answer questions, but to make sustainable systemic change for student press freedom.

Expansion of SPLC Organizing and Advocacy to Strengthen and Expand Press Freedom Rights

SPLC has spearheaded and coordinated the grassroots, nonpartisan New Voices movement since its inception. The movement seeks to restore student journalists’ Tinker-based First Amendment rights after the Supreme Court’s vague and overbroad 1988 decision in Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier created a First Amendment carve-out, permitting administrators broad discretion in censoring student journalism.

Over the past three years, SPLC has transformed our organizing and advocacy focus — moving from a singular emphasis on passing New Voices student press freedom restoration legislation to creating strategies to robustly implement new and existing New Voices laws on the ground. These strategies include educating all stakeholders — students, advisers and administrators — to know student journalists’ rights, and empowering student journalists to investigate their own student media policies and to advocate for local policy change. In addition, SPLC’s efforts to defend student journalists have expanded to engage around the protection of student journalists and journalism education in light of vague and overbroad “prohibited concepts” legislation, which seems likely to undercut independent student media in many parts of the country.

2 The U.S. Supreme Court decision in Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District (1969) established clear standards for student free speech rights in school. In a 7-2 decision, the Supreme Court’s majority famously stated that neither students nor teachers “shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.”
In 2019, new funding enabled SPLC to hire our first New Voices Organizer. In October 2019, we held the first national New Voices Training Institute, bringing together advocates (both students and advisers) from nine states to engage in training and planning for future legislative advocacy. Among the leaders at that first Institute were advisers and students from Hawai’i and New Jersey who, two years later, despite the intervening pandemic, would finally see their New Voices bills signed into law after many years of effort. In addition, advocates from New York, Texas and Pennsylvania were present and have since transformed their grassroots work and strategies to get closer than before.

The dynamics of that first Institute also highlighted the need to create student-specific activities and resources to pull/push students to the front of advocacy efforts. Being student-led along with student-centered has become a guiding principle of our advocacy work.

While 11 New Voices bills were introduced across the country in 2020 and gained traction, the pandemic stopped New Voices advocacy in its tracks. Legislative sessions were suspended, agendas were truncated and only pandemic-related issues were considered.

At the same time, the pandemic-constrained years of 2020 and 2021 provided an excellent opportunity to organize, consolidate, strategize and train new cohorts of student leaders and build community among existing advocates. SPLC established an annual virtual training, the New Voices Student Leaders Training Institute, which has been a vitally important feeder for student leaders as they learn to power map, tell their stories, organize and advocate. Institute graduates become go-to leaders in their state movements, as organizers and role models for other students interested in getting involved.

New Voices bills have been introduced in at least 11 state legislatures each year for the past three years. Momentum has grown as more than 20 states have established or emerging grassroots New Voices groups (in addition to the 16 states which already have laws). But what has also become clear during this period is that educating student journalists about their rights and restoring their Tinker protections through New Voices is not enough to defend student journalism.

*Hawai’i Gov. David Ige signs the Hawai’i Student Journalism Protection Act at McKinley High School, Honolulu on May 24, 2022*
A SNAPSHOT OF NEW VOICES
2019–2022

15 STATES INTRODUCED BILLS.

CO, IA, KY, NM, MO, NE, NY, PA, VA, TX, WV, IL, NJ, HI and FL introduced New Voices legislation.

Colorado and Iowa signed laws to strengthen New Voices protections in their states.

2 IMPROVED LAWS.


2 NEW LAWS.

The New Voices Student Leaders Institute helps students improve leadership and organizing skills and develop their role in the New Voices movement.

63 STUDENT LEADERS TRAINED.

Students from AL, FL, GA, IL, KY, MI, MN, MO, NC, NJ, NY, PA, TX, and VA participated in the Institute since 2020.

14 STATES WERE REPRESENTED AT THE INSTITUTE.
Confronting Broad New Threats to Student Journalism and Journalism Education

New legislative threats to education may directly impact the First Amendment and free expression rights of student journalists and SPLC has expanded our advocacy and organizing to address this growing threat.

With lightning speed, a large number of “Anti-CRT,” “Don’t Say Gay” and “Divisive Concepts” bills have made their way through state legislatures and become law in 2022. Known as “Prohibited Content” legislation or “Educational Gag Orders,” most people are looking at how these laws will impact teachers. Lost is the fact that these laws are often so all-encompassing that they create a potential existential threat to student journalism as well. Where “supplemental educational materials” (which could encompass student media or relevant sources) are implicated, student journalists and journalism educators are uniquely impacted. Many of the bills would also restrict the ways in which journalism can be taught. What is clear, however, is that no matter what the law says, these laws — and even the introduction of bills or discussions of these restrictions — are creating a climate of fear and having a chilling effect on both teachers and students as they seek to explore issues of race, gender, sexual identity or anything deemed controversial in student media.

In September 2021, SPLC licensed bill-tracking software for the first time, enabling us to monitor not only New Voices legislation but this broader swath of legislation that threatens independent student media. This has allowed us to proactively work with allies and constituents to make them aware of the threats and to develop strategies to address them.

As a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, we are very careful to ensure that SPLC’s intervention stays clearly focused on the impact that such legislation would have on student journalism and journalism education. Most recently, SPLC submitted a letter to the South Carolina legislature regarding several wildly broad anti-CRT bills, as well as comments to proposed regulations in Tennessee to implement a similar law.

We continue to monitor the legislation and engage with local partners about the impact of these bills. Most importantly, we are monitoring what will happen in states that have both New Voices protections and “Prohibited Concepts” laws. As of November 2022, there are three such states: Arkansas, Iowa and North Dakota. We are working with leaders in each of these states to carefully monitor the ways in which these conflicting statutes are implemented with an eye to potentially bringing litigation if a ripe case arises. This would be a significant new strategy for SPLC.

When we began discussing this in summer 2021, we anticipated that this work would increase but we did not know how widespread these bills would be nor how quickly they would take hold. Monitoring these overbroad “prohibited concepts” bills that
threaten student journalism and engaging to protect student free press rights has become another high priority.

Expanding SPLC’s Advocacy Beyond State-based New Voices Legislation

SPLC’s advocacy and organizing work has evolved from focusing time and energy on recruiting, training and strategically supporting grassroots leaders to building community and sharing learning. The organizing work has also now evolved into creating tools and resources to enable student journalists to become force multipliers by investigating their local policies, analyzing them with SPLC’s assistance and advocating to expand protections through district level policies.

In May 2022, school administrators at Lyman High School in Florida stopped the scheduled distribution of the yearbook, insisting that stickers be placed over a section documenting a student walk-out protesting the Florida Parental Rights in Education (aka “Don’t Say Gay”) law. The school gave shifting justifications for censoring the yearbook. The students called the SPLC hotline to speak with an attorney.

SPLC issued a censorship alert, published the targeted yearbook pages on our website and publicized the situation (and the spread) on social media. We consulted with the students as they organized and took their fight public, including local and national media coverage, a coordinated social media campaign (#stophthestickers) and an organized presence to address the school board. After more than a dozen students, teachers and parents testified at the school board meeting, the board voted to rescind the decision to cover up the walkout reporting and instead to apply small stickers that would not obstruct the student reporting, clarifying that the
walkout was not a school-sponsored event. School board members even offered to pay for the stickers from their own pockets.

In the past, SPLC would have ended our involvement there. The battle was won.

But today, one of our core commitments is to shift the legal landscape and to create durable solutions to student press freedom problems, rather than only putting out fires.

In a new move aligning with that approach, the next day, SPLC sent a letter to the Seminole County School Board, congratulating them for their action and encouraging them to modify their student media policy to clarify the ambiguities that had led to the embarrassing incident, and to align with New Voices protections (while there is an active New Voices group in Florida, Florida does not yet have a New Voices law). We provided a model student media policy and offered to meet with the school board and their attorney to discuss the proposal and assist in any way. As of November 2022, the board has yet to take up the proposal, but we continue to find ways to elevate the issue.

Inspired by the fight in Seminole County, students in at least three other school districts in Florida reached out to SPLC to see what they can do to proactively change their school district student media policies to conform to New Voices standards. They feel pressure in Florida, and they are not waiting for elusive state legislative protections. They are trying to protect student journalism at the school and district level right now.

In the meantime, the threat of censorship continues to loom in Seminole County. At the start of the 2022-2023 school year, yearbook journalists at all four high schools in Seminole County are facing increased scrutiny and enhanced prior review — a change from previous years. Student journalists throughout the county continue to advocate for reform.

In recognition of their intrepid advocacy, in November 2022, the staff of Lyman High School’s Greyhound yearbook and EIC Sara Ward were presented with SPLC’s Student Press Freedom Award in front of 3100 student journalists at the JEA/NSPA National High School Journalism Convention in St. Louis, Missouri.
At Lyman High School, student journalists won the battle and the 2021-2022 yearbook was not censored. Now we are trying to win the war by creating a clear policy that is protective of the independence of student journalists.

Launch of Robust Implementation/Know Your Rights Programs in New Voices States

One of the other significant shifts in SPLC strategy over this period is the recently launched effort around implementation and accountability for student press freedom laws. We recognize that simply adopting a New Voices law is not enough — it needs to be robustly implemented and student journalists themselves need to understand and claim their rights.

In January 2021, SPLC launched a pilot project in states that had recently adopted New Voices laws to ensure that student journalists know their rights; that school administrators, attorneys and teachers know the law; and that student journalism is protected on the ground as much as it is protected by law.

The efforts to push implementation of the law is multi-faceted and the work has quickly evolved, with SPLC adding a new staff attorney to work with the advocacy team to hold states accountable.

Among the first steps we took in this new initiative was to spot-check student media policies using public records requests in two states which had relatively recently adopted New Voices laws: Washington and Illinois. When received, we analyzed the policies to evaluate compliance with the state’s New Voices legal obligations and then followed-up with letters to the local school boards with suggested modifications that would bring their policies into compliance. In some areas, like Wenatchee, Washington, we saw immediate results as the school board made changes and voted on a revised policy within weeks of receiving SPLC’s letter. In other areas, there was little response.

Some school districts responded that they were checking with the Washington State School Districts Association (WSSDA), a central agency which provides most public schools in Washington with their various policies. SPLC reached out to WSSDA and was able not only to help educate WSSDA
attorneys about the new law, but we helped WSSDA amend its own model policy to comply. In addition, WSSDA published an article in its magazine by SPLC New Voices Organizer Hillary Davis about the new law and its requirements, reaching all school board attorneys throughout the state.

As new New Voices laws have been adopted in New Jersey and Hawai‘i, we now look to identify corollary organizations in those states to advise on updating (or rewriting) student media policies. With strong laws in place, we have found such organizations to be very open to SPLC’s assistance.

SPLC has also developed state-specific booklets which explain the New Voices laws to school administrators, teachers and students. In late 2021, these booklets were mailed to every school Superintendent in Washington state. In early 2022, all student newsrooms in Washington State received a hard copy of the booklet along with a Know Your Rights poster to hang in their newsroom. All of these resources are also available online. In spring 2022, school superintendents and school board presidents in all 690 school districts in New Jersey received an electronic version of the New Jersey booklet and outreach to newsrooms and teachers continues.

While the education of stakeholders is important and assistance in changing student media policies is helpful, SPLC is also engaging in strategies around accountability — making sure that school districts are complying with the law. New Jersey’s New Voices law, signed into law in December 2021, has a requirement that written student media policies be in place in every school district before the start of the new academic year. In October 2022, SPLC reviewed student media policies in 100 school districts in New Jersey and found that 52% were out of compliance with the New Voices law, 10 months after its adoption. We sent a letter to the New Jersey Commissioner of Education, strongly urging that she issue guidance to all school boards about complying with the law, along with the model student media policy. Efforts for accountability in New Jersey are ongoing.

Similarly, after a censorship case arose in Olympia, Washington, four years after passage of the New Voices law, SPLC found that no written student media policy was in place in Olympia. After several communications with the school district (including a joint letter with high profile pro bono counsel at Davis Wright Tremaine LLC), the
school district finally adopted a written policy that complies with the law — a victory for students and advisers.

As we have embarked on this initiative, we have been considering how to scale our efforts toward accountability and education about the new laws. Recognizing that it is difficult to reach out to and follow up with hundreds of school districts in each state — and staying focused on our student-centered values — SPLC developed a set of tools that student journalists can use to both use public records requests to obtain their school district’s student media policy and then to do a first-level analysis of how the policy complies with New Voices standards.

This helps to educate student journalists about their rights, the law in their state and the potential gap between New Voices standards and what is in effect in their school. SPLC will be rolling out a full toolkit to help students advocate for change on the district level to create or improve district-level student media policies that will expand and protect student press freedom for student journalists.

By providing such tools and empowering student journalists to investigate and advocate for their own free press rights, SPLC is not only training student journalists to investigate (and report on) key public policies which impact them directly, but also training young people in how to obtain information from government authorities, advocate for change, and ensure the fair and equitable application of law and policy — core tenets of a healthy and functioning democracy.

**Strengthening Existing New Voices Laws; Encouraging Smart Laws Rather Than Fast Laws**

As we expand our work on implementation and accountability, we have found that some existing New Voices laws need to be strengthened.

After school administrators literally **ripped out pages of the yearbook** at Bigelow High School in Arkansas, SPLC worked with student editors and the adviser who reached out to the SPLC free legal hotline to hold the administration accountable. School officials had cited “public backlash” over the yearbook’s coverage of current events
(including the murder of George Floyd). SPLC helped to get both local and national news coverage of the story (which was widely covered.) After a public records request revealed no evidence of the so-called “public backlash,” we then turned to the Arkansas New Voices law, first adopted in 1995, to take next steps.

What we found, however, is that while students have free press protections on paper, the Arkansas law does not have provisions that provide actionable steps to remedy such an egregious situation. This followed our experience in Illinois when we tried to examine compliance of school student media policies with the Illinois New Voices law and found that there was no requirement in the law to have a written policy. This has led us to look critically at earlier New Voices laws and identify where/how we might strengthen existing laws. It has also helped to evolve SPLC’s model New Voices law.

**Growth and Institutionalization of Student Press Freedom Day**

Created by SPLC in 2018 to mark the 30th anniversary of the *Hazelwood* decision, **Student Press Freedom Day** (SPF Day) has, over the past three years, evolved and been institutionalized as a national day of celebration and amplification for student journalists across the country. SPF Day has grown each year in its reach and impact (including two pandemic years when no in-person activities could take place).

In addition to all major scholastic and collegiate journalism organizations participating and hundreds of student newspapers and media programs being involved, nearly 30 national press freedom and journalism organizations joined SPF Day in 2022 by holding events and/or using their social media platforms to amplify the day. SPF Day has also now become an integral part of Scholastic Journalism Week, sponsored by the Journalism Education Association.

Events for SPF Day have run the gamut. The most important have been those on the ground organized by student journalists themselves. One year, student journalists created their own “Newseum” in the school library to educate their peers about student press freedom. Students have created videos and other educational materials about student press freedom. Student newspapers across the country have run special issues to celebrate. A town hall meeting on the eve of SPF Day in New Jersey in 2021 is largely credited with
motivating legislators and advocates and creating the momentum to get the New Jersey New Voices law across the finish line later that year.

Among SPLC’s highlighted activities are:

In 2020, SPLC held a live-streamed event on SPF Day at the National Archives with an introduction by the Archivist of the United States, David Ferriero, prior to a discussion by student journalists from around the country.

In 2021, with the theme of “Journalism Against the Odds,” Student Press Freedom Day celebrated great student journalism throughout the pandemic. Curating 21 excellent student stories of journalism against the odds, and creating a white paper outlining the challenges to student press freedom, SPLC tried to amplify the great contributions of student journalists. SPLC sponsored an op-ed writing workshop led by veteran journalist Steven A. Holmes that paired students with coaches, many of whom came from the National Society of Newspaper Columnists, to produce opinion pieces that were published on CNN.com, Newsweek, the Richmond Times Tribune and many local and regional newspapers. We also held screenings throughout the country of the documentary Raise Your Voice, which follows the student journalists at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in the wake of the Parkland shooting.

In 2022, at a moment when educational gag orders were being considered throughout the country, some of which would directly impact independent student media and all of which had a chilling effect on school administrators, SPF Day 2022’s theme was “Unmute Yourself!”

Critically important to SPF Day are our evolving efforts to anchor the day with skills trainings leading up to the day to help student journalists understand their role as journalists in a democracy, and to empower student journalists to use their unique voices to tell their stories. SPLC held four well-attended skills-building workshops leading up to SPF Day 2022: Op-Ed Writing; Advocacy for Student Press Freedom; How to be a Spokesperson; and Using Social Media for Advocacy. We also rolled out a 50-state guide for taking action for student press freedom.

In addition, partners held events focused on student journalists, including the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (editorial cartooning); Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (self-censorship of college journalists); and PEN America (which featured an event with Mary Beth Tinker in discussion with student journalist leaders from across the country). The National Press Photographers Association partnered with SPLC to conduct a student press freedom photo competition. Student newspapers
across the country featured editorials highlighting SPF Day, and in New York, New Voices advocates had a town hall meeting including legislators and activists to create momentum around the bill currently pending in the state. SPLC also used Instagram Live as an outreach vehicle, holding an event with Pulitzer Prize winning journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey interviewed by students at Harris-Townsend High School in New York.

This is consistent with SPLC’s commitment to encourage student journalists to know their rights and use their skills to promote and defend student press freedom, as well as SPLC’s priority to partner with external organizations to amplify the messages and experiences of student journalists as part of the struggle to defend the future of journalism and a healthy democracy. SPF Day 2023 will take place on Thursday, February 23, 2023. The theme is “Bold Journalism and Brave Advocacy.”

Creation of Training Institutes and Opportunities

SPLC is clear that student journalists are at the center of our work. As noted above, we have moved into proactively empowering them with tools, training and resources over the past three years to enable them to learn the law, analyze its application and work to expand its protections. This is manifesting in the impact of the New Voices Student Leaders Institute, which had its third cohort in 2022, the carryover of two cohorts of the Summer Media Law and Policy Institute, and SPLC’s newest institute in partnership with PEN America, the Global Press Freedom Institute. In addition, we have expanded the reach of SPLC in the Classroom, virtual training modules we launched prior to the pandemic but which now reach thousands of students each year. And in 2021, we piloted a new program to train school administrators, teachers and other staff in partnership with the Freedom Forum Institute, training all 12,000 employees of the Austin (Texas) Independent School District on First Amendment and press freedom law.

Summer Media Law and Policy

Upon realizing that many law students would no longer have summer internships and other opportunities in summer 2020 due to the pandemic, SPLC created a first-of-its-kind three-week online training opportunity focused on media law for law and pre-law students. An explicit goal of the program is to provide a substantive opportunity for underrepresented students to delve deeply into media law and to provide mentoring.
opportunities between pre-law and law students.

For both years the program ran (2020 and 2021), it included discussions with media law experts, a two-day deep dive into policy advocacy (using New Voices as the example) and a week-long moot court competition focused on a student journalism issue, supported by coaches and judged by well-known practitioners.

Outreach targeted HBCUs and HSIs and the participants were a remarkably diverse group, consisting of many first-generation students, people of color and students from a wide range of diverse backgrounds. Despite excellent evaluations and enthusiasm, the program took a hiatus in summer 2022 as we considered how to reorganize it to accommodate students with in-person summer jobs and internships.

Global Press Freedom Institute

In spring 2022, SPLC, in partnership with PEN America, piloted a six-week Global Press Freedom Institute exploring core principles of press freedom and contrasting how they are approached (similarities and differences) in different contexts and different parts of the world. The program was targeted at student journalists and recruited nationally. Eighteen students, ranging from high school to graduate school, joined the all-online program. The syllabus explored core principles of press freedom globally, but also grounded each session in the experience of student journalists.

We incorporated 10 guest speakers from around the world, including Kirill Artemenko, the CEO of St. Petersburg, Russia-based online media company Paperpaper who was speaking from exile in Tbilisi, Georgia; Dr. Faizullah Jan, Department of Journalism and Mass Communications, University of Peshawar, Pakistan; Troy Closson, former EIC of the Northwestern Daily and current NY Times reporter; and Wa Lone, formerly imprisoned Reuters journalist from Myanmar. We were also joined by two student journalists from Ukraine who spoke to the group from their bathroom where they were sheltering in Kyiv. Evaluations for the Institute were overwhelmingly positive and we look forward to building on this model in the future.

As part of the Institute, SPLC and PEN America co-sponsored an event for the UNESCO World Press Freedom Day Global Conference entitled, “Censorious Assaults on Education and Collateral Impacts on Student Press Freedom.” The event included SPLC Board member and former SPF Day Co-Chair Pratika Katiyar speaking
alongside representatives from South Africa and India. Our engagement in the conference has spurred interest at UNESCO in expanding the role and profile of student journalists in the Global Conference next year. We are actively exploring that opportunity.

**New Voices Student Leaders Institute**

Now in its third year, the [New Voices Student Leaders Institute](#) is an intensive training program for high school students who take on leadership roles in state-based New Voices advocacy. Participants must apply and have a recommendation to participate, and they commit to working on student press freedom advocacy as a top priority for the following school year. Students are selected so that there are several from each state and recruitment from target states is prioritized. Among the topics covered are basics of student press freedom, civics 101, power mapping and organizing, storytelling/being a spokesperson and self-care for activists. As is the case with the other institutes, the format and time frame of the online institute has changed year to year as we try to adapt to the return to in-person summer activities. In 2022, the NV Student Leaders Institute included 18 students from 10 states.

**Austin Independent School District Trainings**

In addition to working directly with students, SPLC has expanded engagement with school administrators and school board attorneys to promote student press freedom for public school student journalists.

Over the course of 2022, SPLC has had a unique opportunity in collaboration with the Freedom Forum to conduct First Amendment trainings for all 12,000 employees of the Austin (Texas) Independent School District. Together, we trained all of the principals, vice principals, elementary, middle and high school teachers, AISD police force, and administrative staff. The two-hour modules were slightly tweaked for different audiences and focused on student First Amendment rights with a heavy dose of student press freedom. Feedback from participants was excellent. One teacher recognized SPLC staff at the spring JEA convention in Los Angeles and said that things had really shifted in her school following our training. Another participant wrote, “Excellent training, I like that there are multiple presenters. It is interesting and engaging and some of the most fair, balanced voices I’ve heard in a long time.”
Similar to our engagement with school boards and policy creators in New Jersey, the positive engagement with administrators, teachers and school leadership has potential for great proactive impact, training folks so we can shift the landscape to prevent fires from breaking out rather than solely addressing problems in an emergency.

Given the enthusiasm with which the formerly skeptical AISD organizers have embraced the training, SPLC and the Freedom Forum Institute are exploring how we might be able to seek external funding together to market this training to other school districts (in Texas and beyond).

**SPLC in the Classroom**

In August 2019, SPLC launched “SPLC in the Classroom,” an effort to expand the reach of our educational trainings by offering Zoom sessions with SPLC experts to teach about student press freedom and media law issues. It allows SPLC experts to reach communities of students who are not able to attend national or regional conventions. While SPLC continues to lead dozens of training workshops at high school and college journalism conventions around the country every year, the SPLC in the Classroom program has become a broad outreach tool that grew over the course of the pandemic. Since its launch, we have reached nearly 2000 students per year in an average of 25 states per year.
THREE YEARS OF IMPACT
BY THE NUMBERS

WE ANSWERED 2,701 CALLS TO OUR FREE LEGAL HOTLINE.

WE ANSWERED CALLS FROM ALL 50 STATES, INCLUDING D.C., AND CALLS FROM CANADA AND IRELAND.

WE TRAINED 4,916 STUDENTS WITH SPLC IN THE CLASSROOM.

WE TAUGHT STUDENTS FROM 29 STATES THROUGH SPLC IN THE CLASSROOM, INCLUDING D.C.

WE LED 198 WORKSHOPS BETWEEN STUDENT PRESS FREEDOM DAY AND SPLC IN THE CLASSROOM.
Weighing in with Amicus Briefs on Key Legal Issues

SPLC submits amicus (friend of the court) briefs where issues relevant to student journalists are being considered in court cases at the state or federal level. During the three-year period, we submitted or signed onto a variety of amicus briefs dealing with issues as varied as transparency in campus police records or college and university finances to the criminalization of students’ disruptive speech directed at school employees.

Most notably, SPLC submitted an amicus brief to the U.S. Supreme Court in 2021, joined by seven other scholastic and college journalism organizations, to urge the Court to limit schools’ authority over off-campus speech in the case of Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L. The case involved a high school student who, when she did not make the varsity cheer squad, posted a heated message on her personal Snapchat account while sitting at a coffee shop with a friend on a Saturday afternoon. Among her graphic comments were, “f*ck school, f*ck cheer, f*ck everybody.” She was suspended for the post.

SPLC’s brief in the Supreme Court focused on the very serious impact this case could have on legitimate off-campus student journalists and whistleblowers.

The Court ruled in favor of the student. It said that the school had violated her First Amendment rights, but it declined to set forth a broad rule defining when schools can restrict off-campus speech. Justice Alito, in his concurrence, actually cited SPLC’s brief on page 16.

Upgrading of Operational Capacity and Remote Staffing

Over the past three years, SPLC’s operational infrastructure has continued to evolve to support the expanded needs and pressures of fulfilling our mission. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, SPLC staff went all-remote and we continue to work as an all-remote, geographically-dispersed team. We have integrated workplace management tools to increase efficiencies and learned to function as a fully
dispersed staff. Due to stable multi-year funding, we were able to weather the financial upheavals of the pandemic successfully.

In 2021, we secured bill tracking software for the first time, which, in light of the challenges outlined above, has enabled us to closely monitor the progress of New Voices bills and also to identify growing legislative threats to student press freedom.

In one of the most important steps to solidify SPLC’s infrastructure, improve our communication, identify trends, and quantify our impact, SPLC licensed a CRM (Salesforce) in 2022 that will integrate all contacts within the organization. When completely implemented, the platform will provide a new legal hotline management system, stronger tracking of our trainings and workshops, enhanced donor and fundraising functionality and better email and communications tracking. The CRM will enable us to use data both to tell the story of student journalists and SPLC’s impact, and to report on trends in the field.

Once launched, we plan to integrate publicly available information about schools and universities to enable us to do deeper research and analysis. Operationally, the CRM will also enable us to use data to expand our communications and fundraising capacity, which have been limited due to outdated systems.

Thanks to new funding over the past three years, we have also expanded our team: adding a new staff attorney, enhancing our organizing and advocacy potential, and hiring SPLC’s first assistant director. These are significant steps forward which are enabling SPLC to integrate strategy, track impact and raise SPLC’s profile, expand our storytelling capacity and, most importantly, elevate the important work of student journalists.

Diversification of Board of Directors and launch of internal IDEA initiative

As we have expanded our team, we have also been intentional about substantially changing the make-up of our Board of Directors and staff. Currently, six out of 13 members of our Board of Directors are people of color or LGBTQI+-identified. In early 2022, three out of seven full-time staff members were people of color.

As our staff grows, we are mindful in our hiring practices to seek a diverse team, and as we hire consultants and vendors, we are also prioritizing our commitment to diversity.
In addition, we have launched a staff-driven IDEA initiative (inclusion, diversity, equity and access), which is engaging staff in hard discussions and changing the way we are working. We held an all-staff workshop to strategize about how to make all SPLC services fully accessible to people with disabilities. Discussions ranged from ensuring that our website was accessible to screen readers for people with visual impairments, to ensuring that any Zoom-based trainings or events had closed captioning services activated and were managed in a way that would provide multiple points of entry for neurodiverse learners. We have also had discussions about expanding SPLC resources in Spanish. In addition, we are engaging in a compensation analysis which will ensure that our policy is not only competitive and transparent but also equitable. This is only the beginning of these efforts.

Adoption of Adaptive Strategic Plan

Although delayed by the pandemic, SPLC conducted a strategic planning process which concluded in late 2021 with a two-year adaptive plan that positions SPLC for the future.

Over an eight-month period, we conducted more than 25 interviews, surveyed more than 100 respondents and researched the organizational and advocacy landscapes. In July 2021, the SPLC Board and staff had an in-person retreat to discuss the organization’s direction and hammer out the parameters of the two-year adaptive plan.

The plan identifies four key programmatic priorities:

- Shifting the Legal Landscape
- Expanding Partnerships
- Elevating Visibility/Reach/Impact through Communications, Outreach and Engagement
- Evolving the Organization to Thrive

The development of the strategic plan was a thorough and intentional process which allows us now to ground our work and strategy on clearly articulated outcomes, values and beliefs. The adaptive nature of SPLC’s strategic plan (which provides a broad rubric for decision-making as well as concrete goals and outcome objectives) has allowed SPLC to shift priorities in light of new developments, even since the plan was adopted by the Board in December 2021.

To date, we have achieved more than 90% of our identified implementation goals through the period since the plan was adopted.
What Have We Learned and Where Are We Going?

The Vision statement in SPLC’s new strategic plan states:

The Student Press Law Center envisions a world where all student journalists are respected, know their rights, and are protected by law to express themselves freely as full and essential members of a healthy democratic society.

SPLC’s work over the past three years has taken significant steps toward empowering students to know their rights, ensure that they are protected by law and that student journalists are, in fact, expressing themselves freely as active members of our democratic society.

As a result of SPLC’s work, more than 4,000 student journalists each year have learned directly about media law, student press freedom and had questions and concerns addressed by SPLC lawyers through the SPLC free legal hotline, training workshops or SPLC in the Classroom.

As a result of SPLC’s work, the legal landscape for student press freedom has changed. Student journalists and advisers have press freedom protections in 16 states, including New Jersey and Hawai’i, which adopted New Voices student press freedom restoration legislation in 2021 and 2022, respectively.

As a result of SPLC’s work, awareness of the impact of student journalists and the challenges they face is dramatically increasing due to the iterative growth and recognition of the SPLC-created Student Press Freedom Day.

As a result of SPLC’s work, journalism education organizations and press freedom groups understand that threats to student press freedom are multi-faceted and immediate, manifesting not only as direct attacks on press freedom, but now also as a result of attacks on educational independence. SPLC has sounded the alarm bell and such organizations are tuned-in and working in partnership with SPLC to confront the many challenges.

As a result of SPLC’s work, student journalists, often the most engaged and active students at a school, have the ability, confidence and desire to report controversial or engaged stories and stand up for their rights to publish.

What is changing is student journalists’ understanding of the law and how to use it to investigate their own rights — skills that will serve them not only in a future journalism career but also as engaged citizens in a democracy. Student journalists are using public records requests and partnering with SPLC to understand their student media policies and to advocate for change and broader protections.

What is changing is student journalists’ confidence to assert their rights against censorship and administrative review in states that have New Voices protections or New Voices-compliant student media policies. This is the case in Olympia,
Washington, where high school student journalists pushed back against censorship they encountered by using one of the strongest New Voices laws in the country to advocate for their position.

**What is changing** is the willingness of key actors (e.g., school board attorneys, drafters of district policies, school boards, superintendents, school administrators) to learn about and modify current policies in order to comply with New Voices standards. This is taking place both in states where there are already New Voices laws (like Washington, Illinois, New Jersey, Hawai‘i) and also in some districts with New Voices protections where students are particularly engaged advocates.

**What will change** is that as students and advisers (and superintendents and principals) know their rights, students will be emboldened to report on vital issues in the life of their school and broader community without fear of arbitrary administrative censorship or retaliation. Where student journalists are aware of their rights, they are more willing to report stories that may create reactions or controversy.

**What will change** is that where SPLC can work with students on the ground in states that have both New Voices laws and “Prohibited Concepts” laws, student journalists will challenge “Prohibited Concept” laws which violate their First Amendment rights.

**What will change** is that as SPLC raises its profile, consolidates and streamlines its ability to track trends and calls, and continues to build its infrastructure and capacity, SPLC’s vision of a world where student journalists are respected, know their rights and are protected to express themselves freely will be fully realized.
THANK YOU TO OUR GENEROUS DONORS

You have powered SPLC’s growth and continue to make all our work possible.

2019-2022 INSTITUTIONAL DONORS

Democracy Fund
Dow Jones News Fund
Edouard Foundation
Paul and Ann Sagan
Rita Allen Foundation
Robert R. McCormick Foundation
Ruth & Ezra Chesky Foundation
Sandler Foundation
The Gridiron Club and Foundation
Yellow Chair Foundation
Associated Collegiate Press
Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication
College Media Association
Delaware Press Association
Florida Scholastic Press Association
Garden State Scholastic Press Association
Illinois College Press Association
Illinois Community College Journalism Association
Illinois Journalism Education Association
JEA of Northern California
Journalism Education Association
Kettle Moraine Press Association
Michigan Interscholastic Press Association
National Scholastic Press Association
Ohio Scholastic Media Association
Quill & Scroll
SNO Sites
Texas Association of Journalism Educators
Virginia Association of Journalism Teachers and Advisers
Washington Journalism Education Association

And many thanks to the more than 800 individual donors, student media program members, law firms and other generous supporters.
Since 1974, the Student Press Law Center has worked to support, promote and defend the First Amendment and freedom of expression rights of student journalists at the high school and college level, and the advisers who support them. The SPLC is an independent, non-profit 501c(3) organization based in Washington, D.C.