May 16, 2024

Governor Tim Walz
C/O Teddy Tschann, Deputy Chief of Staff
C/O Ellie Anderson, Deputy Press Secretary
75 Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr Blvd #130
St. Paul, MN 55155

Letter in Support of Student Journalism Provisions in SF 3567

Dear Governor Walz:

We write to you concerning SF 3567, an omnibus bill related to education. A section of this bill (Omnibus Sec. 21, 121A.80) restores and protects the press freedom of Minnesota’s student journalists. The Student Press Law Center stands in strong support of these protections, and would be happy to answer any questions or concerns you may have regarding these provisions or other student press freedom matters.

The Student Press Law Center (SPLC) is an independent, non-partisan organization that, since 1974, has helped students of all ages participate in civic life and learn essential skills, ethics and values through the vehicle of journalism. Our hotline provides free legal services to student journalists and advisers. As such, we see daily the significant need for such legislation.

We know firsthand that these provisions of SF 3567 will have a positive impact to remedy censorship in your state. A Minnesota high school media adviser contacted our free legal hotline for guidance when administration told her that she needed to censor “anything controversial” when students wanted to cover Black History Month. Administration provided no further definition of what “controversial” meant. (Advisers are already in a tenuous position between their employment to the district and their unique responsibility to convey best practices to their journalism students, necessitating the adviser protections in this bill.) The same high school administration threatened to completely shut down its broadcasting program, a threat directly related to the program's well-researched coverage of Black History Month.

Another Minnesota high school’s administrator wanted to censor a piece about suicide reporting in the aftermath of a suicide in the community, stifling any and all conversation in a safe and monitored
environment. The administrator had not even reviewed the piece. Such situations give rise to unrestricted and unhelpful rumors on social media that lack the useful speech guardrails of this bill.

Nationwide, SPLC has seen yearbooks censored because students wore MAGA shirts or the swim team wore bathing suits. Newspapers have been censored for reporting on graffiti visible to all students and administrators routinely censor pieces providing oversight into the administrators’ own activities. Award-winning advisers have been reassigned or fired for refusing to infringe upon students from reporting on, among other things, the high cost of feminine hygiene products, a vigil for a fellow student, the improper withholding of documents relating to an administrator’s resignation and curriculum changes. In recent months, students have reported blanket restrictions to any commenting on decisions by administration, reporting sudden disappearances of staff, or even discussing community events.

We recognize there are instances in which administrators may need to exert authority over student media to keep their students safe and the school day orderly. SF 3567 protects that authority. School officials can step in, for example, when there are concerns about an unwarranted invasion of privacy, or the media will be demonstrably disruptive to the school environment — the same "Tinker standard" they apply to all other students. These important provisions of SF 3567 merely ensure that students are no longer censored for subjective or ambiguous reasons. It enables student journalists to tell the truth without fear of reprisal, protects capable and supportive advisers and allows Minnesota’s schools to fulfill their mission to produce the engaged thinkers ready to be our next generation of leaders.

Minnesota will join the seventeen states that have already enacted similar student press freedom laws, including neighbors Iowa and North Dakota. The verdict is clear: these laws do not impact the safety of the school or keep administrators from intervening when necessary. In no state with such a law has there been an outbreak of unethical journalism. You now have the ability to standardize consistent expectations on student journalists and clarify their rights in a manner that has proven successful throughout the country.

We respectfully urge you to sign SF 3567 to the benefit of Minnesota’s student journalists and their advisers.

With Gratitude,

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