

FORMAL APPEAL

Censorship of Student Media at Gretna East High School

Submitted to the Gretna Public Schools Board of Education

March 2026

From: Nicholas Mitchell, Student, Gretna East High School

CC: Aidan McClaren, Student Journalist and Author of the Censored Work

To: Gretna Public Schools Board of Education

Regarding: Appeal of the administrative removal of an editorial cartoon from Gretna East Media and the imposition of prior review on subsequent student media coverage

I. Summary of Events

In February 2026, Gretna East Media (GEM) reporter Aidan McClaren published an editorial cartoon addressing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) operations in Minneapolis, a subject of significant national public interest. Gretna East administrators instructed GEM to remove the cartoon. When GEM subsequently began developing an article about the removal, administrators required that it go through administrative approval before publication, imposing prior review.

On or around March 6, 2026, Andrew Rinaldi, Director of Human Resources, provided a written justification for the removal in an email to our Editor-in-Chief. Mr. Rinaldi cited two reasons: (1) that the school-sponsored publication reflects on the district, and *Hazelwood* allows the district to prevent appearing to take a partisan stance on politically charged matters; and (2) that the editorial cartoon, as a standalone image on a polarizing topic, could be misinterpreted or viewed as biased, potentially alienating students and causing substantial disruption.

I raised this matter with Principal Chad Jepsen and Superintendent Travis Lightle. Principal Jepsen stated that the demands in the petition could not be met because “it’s a school.” When I raised the New Voices framework, he did not engage. Superintendent Lightle was emailed in good faith prior to the public circulation of my personal article and petition. Board member Dawn Stock responded to my outreach and encouraged me to share the SPLC model policy with Mr. Lightle and continue working with the administration. I have done so.

This appeal is not simply about challenging authority. It’s about creating a clear and consistent framework that benefits students, advisors, and administrators alike. The current approach, in which editorial decisions are made without written guidelines by individuals without a defined role in student media, creates confusion and inconsistency for everyone involved. A formal student media policy would provide the structure the district needs to handle these situations fairly, while affirming the district’s commitment to student learning and trust.

II. Grounds for Appeal

A. The district's own Controversial Issues policy supports the cartoon's publication.

Board Policy 6390, "Controversial Issues," adopted June 12, 2017, states that "controversial issues exist where there are sharp differences of opinion concerning an idea or a line of action" and that students "should be afforded opportunities within the classroom to deal with such issues." The policy specifically provides that students should have the opportunity:

"To form, and in an appropriate manner and in appropriate forum, to express the students' own judgments on controversial issues."

An editorial cartoon published in a student newspaper is, by definition, an expression of a student's judgment on a controversial issue in an appropriate manner and forum. The administration's stated reason for censorship—that the cartoon addressed a "highly sensitive and politically charged" topic—is precisely the type of content Policy 6390 says students should be afforded the opportunity to engage with. The removal of the cartoon is therefore inconsistent with the district's own board policy.

B. The administration's justification does not meet the *Hazelwood* standard.

Under *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*, school-sponsored media may be censored only when the decision is "reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns." The administration's stated reasons fall short of this standard for the following reasons:

1. **The partisanship rationale, applied this broadly, would eliminate student opinion journalism entirely.** While *Hazelwood* acknowledges a school's interest in maintaining neutrality on political controversy, applying this rationale to an editorial cartoon on a national news story would prohibit all student opinion content on any political topic. Editorial cartoons are opinion by nature. If any expression of a political viewpoint constitutes impermissible partisanship, the opinion function of student media ceases to exist—and the district's own Policy 6390, which encourages students to express their judgments on controversial issues, becomes meaningless. Student media reflects student voices, not district endorsement. A policy that includes a simple disclaimer—that student media content does not represent the views of the district—would address the partisanship concern without eliminating student opinion journalism. The legal authority to censor under *Hazelwood* does not mean the district should exercise it in every instance.
2. **The stated disruption concern has no factual basis, rendering the justification unreasonable even under *Hazelwood's* deferential standard.** The administration referenced potential disruption but did not identify any actual disruption that occurred, any specific prior incidents at Gretna East involving similar content, or any concrete facts supporting a reasonable forecast of disruption. A pedagogical justification that rests entirely on speculation, without any supporting evidence, cannot be considered "reasonably related" to a legitimate educational purpose. The absence of any factual basis

suggests the stated concern was made without a clear standard or supporting evidence. The disruption standard the administration invoked originates from *Tinker v. Des Moines*, which requires a reasonable forecast based on specific facts that speech will cause a material and substantial disruption to the school day. Even under *Hazelwood's* more deferential standard, a justification that borrows *Tinker's* disruption rationale but provides none of *Tinker's* requires supporting evidence cannot be considered reasonable.

- 3. The administration's own offer to publish with context undermines the disruption argument.** Mr. Rinaldi stated that the cartoon could be published if accompanied by a written piece providing factual context. If the content is publishable with an accompanying article, it was never inherently disruptive. This concession reveals that the concern was not disruption but editorial disagreement with the cartoon's standalone presentation—a decision that should rest with student editors and their adviser, not with administration.

C. No student media policy exists in the district.

I have reviewed the entire Gretna Public Schools board policy manual, sections 1000 through 9000. There is no policy anywhere in the district addressing student publications, student media, student journalism, or student press freedom. There are no guidelines for editorial decisions, no defined process for administrative review of student media, no standard for when censorship is permissible, no protections for faculty advisers, and no appeals procedure.

The absence of any written policy means that censorship decisions are being made by individual administrators without defined guidance, no consistent standard, and a lack of formal oversight from the Board. In this case, the decision to remove student media content was communicated by the Director of Human Resources—an individual with no defined role in student media oversight—further illustrating the lack of any structured process.

The administration also cited Policy 6391, "Controversial Issues in the Classroom," to justify the removal. However, Policy 6391 is a classroom instruction policy designed to guide teachers in handling controversial topics during instruction—it addresses teacher impartiality, appropriate materials, and protecting educators from unfair criticism when studying controversial subjects. It was never designed to govern editorial decisions in student publications. The use of a classroom teaching policy to justify censoring a student newspaper further demonstrates the district's lack of an applicable student media framework.

D. The student publication has historically operated with editorial independence.

Prior to the February 2026 incident, Gretna East Media operated with substantial editorial independence. Students selected their own topics, exercised editorial judgment, and made decisions about what to publish. While there were occasional, voluntary instances in which student editors sought input from administration, mandatory administrative prior review was not an established practice. The distinction

between students voluntarily consulting with administration and administration requiring approval before publication is significant: the former reflects a collaborative relationship; the latter constitutes institutional control over student expression. The imposition of mandatory administrative pre-approval following the cartoon's removal—without any change in written policy—represents a departure from established practice, not an exercise of existing authority.

III. Requested Actions

I respectfully request that the Board of Education take the following actions:

1. **Adopt a formal student media policy** establishing that editorial decisions in school-sponsored student media rest with student editors and their faculty advisers, not with building-level or district-level administrators. The Student Press Law Center provides a model district policy designed specifically for this purpose, available at splc.org. Such a policy could include a disclaimer that student media content does not represent the official views of the district—directly addressing the concern about the appearance of the district.
2. **Allow republication of the editorial cartoon in a manner agreed upon by student editors, and permit GEM to publish its reporting** on the censorship without the requirement of administrative pre-approval.
3. **End the practice of administrative prior review** of student media content. Faculty advisers—not administrators—are the appropriate editorial check on student journalism.

IV. Community Support

A petition at change.org/stopgretnacensorship has gathered over 360 signatures from students, parents, and community members in support of these three requests. This appeal reflects not only my own position but the concerns of a growing number of stakeholders in the Gretna Public Schools community.

V. Conclusion

These are not radical requests. Eighteen states have passed New Voices laws codifying these protections at the state level. Districts across the country have adopted equivalent policies independently. The Student Press Law Center's model policy has been implemented by school boards in states with and without New Voices legislation.

Gretna East now joins a documented pattern of student press censorship across Nebraska, including incidents at Bellevue East (2009), North Platte (2020), Omaha Westside (2021), and Grand Island Northwest (2022)—all occurring in the absence of state-level protections for student journalists. This pattern underscores the urgency of adopting district-level protections where state law has not yet acted.

Gretna Public Schools' own Policy 6390 recognizes that students should be able to engage with controversial issues and express their own judgments. What is missing is a

policy that ensures this right extends to student media and that provides a clear, consistent framework for all parties.

Gretna Public Schools had already taken meaningful steps to prepare students for democratic engagement—Policy 6390’s commitment to student engagement with controversial issues reflects that vision. A formal student media policy would harmonize with that spirit, extending the same trust to student journalists that the district has already extended to students in the classroom. Gretna has the opportunity to be the district that explicitly puts trust in student voices, and to lead in Nebraska as a model for how schools and student media can work together. We ask the Board to seize that opportunity.

I have pursued every available channel in good faith—meeting with the principal, emailing the superintendent, contacting the Board, and following the appropriate chain of authority. I respectfully ask the Board to consider this appeal and to take the steps necessary to protect student press freedom in our district.

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Enclosures:

- Email from Andrew Rinaldi documenting the reason for censorship
- GPS Board Policy 6390: Controversial Issues
- GPS Board Policy 6391: Controversial Issues in the Classroom
- The editorial cartoon by Aidan McClaren
- SPLC Model District Policy for High School Student Media
- Petition signatures summary (change.org/stopgretnacensorship)
- Letter of support from the Student Press Law Center