

To the Board of Education, Superintendent Taylor, Dr. Moran, and MCPS leadership,

We are student journalists and journalism advisers from across Montgomery County, representing all 25 high schools and the mastheads of 20 student newspapers. We cover the breaking news in our communities, report on administrative and policy decisions that impact thousands of students, and often produce the first public record of what happens inside schools.

We are writing to put something on the record: [Maryland law](#) guarantees significant press freedom protections to student journalists at every single high school.

However, recent guidance circulated via a memo from Dr. Peter Moran has raised serious questions about whether MCPS' policies are consistent with those legal protections. We are asking MCPS to reaffirm its commitment to the law by withdrawing the memo and returning to the Board-approved policy that had previously been in place.

What the law says:

Maryland is one of 18 states that have passed “New Voices” legislation protecting student press freedoms, effectively reversing the [1988 Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier](#) Supreme Court decision that had significantly restricted the rights of student journalists.

[Md. Educ. § 7-121](#), otherwise known as the Maryland New Voices Act, was [signed in April 2016 by Governor Larry Hogan](#). The law establishes that student journalists are the ones responsible for determining the content of school-sponsored media and have the right to exercise freedom of speech and press. The act explicitly states that the school system does not have editorial control over a publication just because the publication is produced as part of a class or supported financially by the school. A student journalist may not be disciplined for publishing content that is lawfully protected under the act, and an adviser may not be retaliated against for refusing to censor their students.

In addition, the act prohibits prior restraint—a term that means the censorship of media *before* it is published—except in narrowly defined circumstances, placing the burden of justification on the school, not the student, and requires that justification be established without “undue delay.”

There are few grounds on which a school may legally restrain student journalism. These exceptions are limited to content that:

1. Is libelous or slanderous
2. Constitutes an unwarranted invasion of privacy
3. Violates federal or state law
4. Incites students to create a clear and present danger of an unlawful act, the violation of county board policies, or material and substantial disruption of the school.

This means that a story that is critical of the administration, uncomfortable for school officials to read, or simply controversial would not meet that bar.

The act does not flatly prohibit all prior review, which is when an administrator requires prior examination of a student publication before it is distributed. However, prior review that extends indefinitely becomes prior restraint. Legal experts and press freedom organizations such as the [Student Press Law Center](#) advise that review extending beyond 72 hours generally functions as prior restraint in practice.

What we are asking:

The memo circulated on March 19 by MCPS Chief of Schools Dr. Peter Moran requires all schools to designate an administrator who is responsible for reviewing every single piece of “student publication and school-related printed material,” prior to publication—in effect, a blanket prior review policy.

However, the memo is vague. It doesn’t establish the legal bar that must be met to justify prior restraint, gives principals approval power over reporting about themselves, sets no timeline, provides no appeals process, and subjects legally distinct materials—such as the student newspaper versus spiritwear—to the same standards. This vagueness risks creating an inconsistent patchwork of enforcement, where student journalists’ rights depend on which principal happens to review their work.

Included in the memo is a list of content administrators are instructed to censor outright. This list includes new entries not found in prior policy such as “embarrassing or private moments,” “ridicule of individuals or groups,” and “sarcasm or teasing that could be interpreted as bullying.”

The problem is that the memo’s list is broader and more subjective than the legal categories identified by the New Voices Act. Terms like “embarrassing,” “ridicule,” and “sarcasm” may describe ordinary journalism, criticism, or commentary, not necessarily legally restrainable content.

A student using his opinion column to harass and spread unfounded gossip about the class president is very different from a student writing a sharp critique of a speech given by a Board of Education member—yet both could be considered “ridicule of individuals or groups.”

We want this to be clear: Any prior review and restraint policy that does not explicitly confine itself to the categories the New Voices Act identifies as legally restrainable is inconsistent with the law and undermines student journalism.

The Student Press Law Center has advised us that the March memo raises serious legal concerns because, as written, it appears to impose broad prior review without clear standards, timelines, appeal rights, or safeguards required to protect student journalists under Maryland law. Even when a policy is not used to censor a specific article, a blanket approval requirement can chill student reporting by making students less willing to pursue controversial or critical stories. In practice, that kind of system risks functioning as unlawful prior restraint.

The [Journalism Education Association](#) further opposes blanket prior review because it has “no legitimate educational purpose.” The very purpose of employing journalism teachers is so that *they* ensure their students engage in ethical and responsible reporting, not the administrators who are being covered.

In addition, MCPS recently passed a [budget](#) that eliminated 415 positions, including 43 social workers who provided critical crisis support to students, 17 EML counselors who help newcomers navigate a brand new cultural environment, and 40 composition assistants who lightened the workload of the very same English teachers who advise our student newspapers. When there is a \$36 million budget shortfall, it makes no sense to be investing additional time and money into implementing a likely illegal prior review policy that suppresses student journalism.

Prior to the release of the memo, MCPS already had student press regulation that complied with the law and gave administrators power to step in when specific, outlined situations occurred. [JFA-RA](#) (Student Rights and Responsibility), a Board-negotiated regulation, codifies the New Voices protections by permitting prior restraint only in the narrow circumstances described by the law, thereby avoiding the “[chilling effect](#).” When prior restraint is necessary, written rationale must be provided within two school days. JFA-RA further establishes the appeals process for prior restraint to be governed by [KLA-RA](#) (Concerns, Complaints, and Appeals to the Superintendent of Schools).

Given this existing framework, we are calling on MCPS to withdraw the memo and return to the Board-approved policy already designed to comply with Maryland law.

After the memo was released, MCPS journalism teachers reached out repeatedly to MCPS officials to share our concerns. For two months now, they’ve been told repeatedly that we would receive a response from Dr. Moran. We continue to wait.

Why does this matter?

Student journalists are often the only reporters covering what happens inside a school building. We cover administrative decisions, disciplinary policies, safety concerns, and countless other issues that affect tens of thousands of students and families who have no other source of information besides the official report. When our reporting is suppressed, the unbiased truth does not get told.

Beyond the loss of coverage, the suppression of student journalism undermines something larger: the education of the next generation of citizens who know how to seek out information, question authority, and hold institutions accountable. A free student press engenders a healthy democracy.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Ian Chen, Maya Abdrashitova, Sascha Ali, Aubrey Ames, Jacob Anderkoo, Ms. Margaret Antonetti, Anwitha Asapu, Eera Avinash, Harinitha Babu, Francesca Bader, Jonathan Bamba, William Baranick, Arden Barber, Caroline Beard, Elise Berndt, Isabella Serrano Berthet, Aarav Bhandari, Aiden Branudeen, Mira de Brauw, Matthew Brill, Catherine Bucsa, Janalie Buitron, Stella Carroccio, Norah Chernoff, Elliot Choi, Aspen Chu, Drew Consolla, Ms. Megan Cooley-Klein, Mia Cullen, Jayden Daproza, Larissa Deng, Callie Deng, Sarah DeStefano, Vee Dimyan, Maya Dorsam, Mia Dove, Masyn Durant, Kiran Durvasula, Andrew Eayrs, Palmer Emmett, Laranjani English, Andrew Fenner, Shayna Fleischer, Sebastian Fries, Seva Gandhi, Kaitlyn Garrett, Zoe Gorbachev, Nicklas Gould, Christopher Greenberg, Ms. Abigail Grifno, Sofia Guidorizzi, Natalie Gussow, Abenezer Haile, Spencer Hardwick, Emmy Henriquez, River Hoagland, Lucy Holland, Mason Holstein, Claire Huang, Aaron Hwang, Rayisa Islam, Aditi Iyer, Lark Jeffers, Satchel Jelen, Tyler Jenkins, Abby Keehn, Ellyn Kim, Aiden Kim, Jacob Kim, Stella Klein, Camille Knight, Ms. Dorothy Koutsos, Monika Krastev, Isabella Langlee, Sofia Larson-Acin, Abby Lee, Theo Leshner, Olivia Levinton, Selena Li, Charis Lin, Casen Linn, Asher Lipczenko, Alessandro Lisa, Fatma M, John John Magruder, Gavin Manske, Marta Marques, Cindy Marroquin, Zafina Matin, Celia Max, Aidan Mazur, Eric Mehler, Ms. Gina Miller, Shibani Mishra, Aviva Mitrani-Reiser, Aniya Molake, Emma Mukhija, Daniela Naaman, Lia Njakou-Tchanga, Lale Olguin, Mr. Jeff O'Toole, Andrea Reyes Padilla, Charlie Penn, Serenity Pittman, Noah Ploff, Sonya Del Pozo, Anshi Purohit, Elisa Reyes, Addison Robbins, Justin Rosentover, Morenike Rossman, Rita Roy, Anvesha Sachan, Marycarmen Duque Sanchez, Ashley Schreiber, Ada Schwartz, Nora Seiden, Yashvi Sethi, Lila Shaw, Katiana Sheppard, Suvir Shetty, Kimaya De Silva, Meghna Singh, Alex Sisco, Sofia Sklias, Will Soffronoff, Ms. Evva Starr, Sammie Stiska, Katherine Sundstrom, Maia Talbot, Yohana Tamire, Chloe Tanseco, Matthew Tantillo, Annabel Taylor, Efratha Tewodros, Eleanor Thompson, Lyla Toor, Heather Tu, Juliet Turatti, Gabriela Ugaz, Sriya Vijay, Varya Voloshchuk, Ava Van Vuren, Annelise van der Walde, Sofia Walendowska, Sophia Wang, Donnie Weber, Amelia Wegner, Rachel Wei, Avery Welsh, Lyra Wolff, Nardos Wondimu, Alexandra Wu, Yongle Xin, Ellie Xu, Jessica Yao, James Yi, Ms. Angela Young, Jocelyn Yuan, Jaasim Zaman, Josh Zelermyer, and Chelsea Zhu.

The Tide (Richard Montgomery), The Tattler (Bethesda Chevy Chase), Silver Chips Print and Silver Chips Online (Blair), The Blake Beat (Blake), The Churchill Observer (Winston Churchill), Coyote Prints (Clarksburg), The Buzz (Damascus), The Nucleus (Einstein), The Trojan Times (Gaithersburg), Mainstream (Paint Branch), The Pulse

(Poolesville), The Prowler (Quince Orchard), The Rampage (Rockville), The Warrior (Sherwood), The Pitch (Walter Johnson), The Current (Watkins Mill), The Black and White (Whitman), The Common Sense (Wootton), and The MoCo Student (Countywide)

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