

Courage in Every Story

STUDENT PRESS
LAW CENTER
2025–2026
IMPACT REPORT

Investing in the Journalism We Need

Friends,

In three years as executive director of the Student Press Law Center, I continue to be struck by the dedication of this community. Whether it's an adviser reaching out about a censorship concern or a student asking for guidance on a story they're determined to report, their courage and steadfast commitment to truth inspires me and gives me hope for the future of democracy and the Fourth Estate. Over the past 12 months, there has been no shortage of those moments.

Our country is facing extreme volatility, and the freedoms that protect the press are under serious threat. Yet student journalists refuse to back down.

Student journalists tell important stories on their campuses and in communities — and they do so at a scale that deserves recognition. This year alone, college journalists across the country are on pace to produce more than a **quarter million bylines**. That's 800 headlines every workday, according to reporting from the newly launched [Student Press Report](#) that we're proud to back. Many of these stories fill critical gaps in local news, increasingly, thanks to the growing network of news-academic partnerships. In 2025, our partners at the [Center for Community News](#) report that more than 9,300 students participated in journalism programs in partnership with local newsrooms — and over **3,000 news outlets benefited from this student-powered reporting**.

Student journalists also hold the powerful accountable, even when the powerful are their own school administrators. From covering ICE in their communities to reporting on campus figures named in the Epstein files, student journalists demonstrate courage in every story.

The Student Press Law Center is with them every step of the way.

This past year, the Student Press Law Center team **trained thousands of student journalists** to know and exercise their First Amendment rights, **fielded daily hotline inquiries** from those navigating censorship in real time and **advocated for New Voices legislation** in statehouses across the country. Even in the face of unimaginable pressures and challenges, we celebrated real wins — censorship reversals, accountability journalism published and court rulings that proved New Voices laws work.

We exist because a free student press makes our communities more connected, more informed and more equipped to advocate for what they need. None of it is possible without partners, donors and supporters who share that belief.

As you explore this school year's Impact Report, I hope these stories of courage spark your sense of hope for a brighter future. Thank you for joining the Student Press Law Center in doing all that we can to protect student voices, their rights and their journalism.

Gary Green
Executive Director



Impact At-a-Glance

This past year, the Student Press Law Center team and our volunteers deepened connections with the students and advisers who bring courageous reporting to life, showing up not just as a legal resource, but as a true ally.

4,011 hours

of pro bono legal support representing \$3.1 million in value

986

hotline inquiries answered across 46 states and Washington, D.C.

Most common hotline inquiries pertained to navigating censorship, libel and copyright issues.

188

trainings reaching 6,328 attendees

Our most attended trainings focused on student press freedom, libel and covering protests.

40+ op-eds and editorials

published by students and **20+ events** hosted to educate their peers

Students nationwide participated in Student Press Freedom Day.

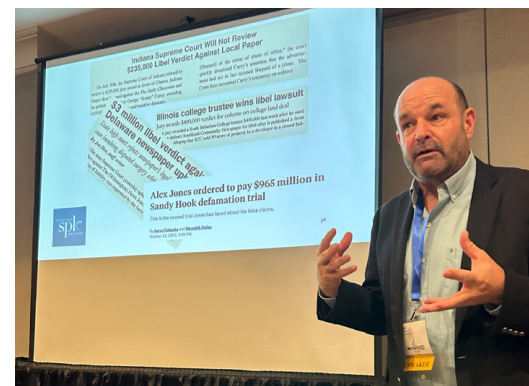
“When our administration censored an editorial cartoon and imposed prior review on our publication, they changed the rules overnight and limited our ability to report freely. With support from the Student Press Law Center, we didn’t just accept that. With their guidance, we were able to challenge the censorship directly and push for a clear policy that protects student journalists moving forward. Because of the Student Press Law Center, we didn’t just react — we advocated for lasting change.”

Aidan McClaren and
Nicholas Mitchell
*Gretna East High School,
Nebraska*

What Guides Our Work

Everything we do at the Student Press Law Center is in service of student journalism. We are the nation's only legal organization exclusively dedicated to student journalists and the educators who support them.

Our team brings decades of deep expertise and experience, and we are committed to offering **free, essential services** that students would not otherwise have access to. Whether student journalists are filing their first public records request or facing down a crisis, the Student Press Law Center is right by their side.



Credit: Student Press Law Center.

What We Do



Legal Help: We provide student journalists and educators one-on-one support and legal expertise through our free hotline, pre-publication review and Attorney Referral Network.



Training and Education: We lead trainings, publish guides and offer tools to help students understand and assert their First Amendment and newsgathering rights.



Advocacy: We advocate for stronger legal protections for student journalism, power the student-led New Voices movement and mobilize support when students' rights are under attack.



Public Awareness: We amplify student voices, raise the visibility of press freedom issues and build a community of support that celebrates and protects student journalism.

Our Mission

The Student Press Law Center defends and advances the First Amendment and newsgathering rights of student journalists, their advisers and educators, emboldening their participation in a free press.

Our Vision

The Student Press Law Center envisions a world where all student journalists are protected by law, can exercise their rights freely and are valued as essential members of the free press, contributing fully to a well-informed, democratic society.

We Fight Against Censorship

Student journalists are leading essential reporting, and they, along with their advisers, are facing threats of censorship and retaliation for doing so. Censorship-related inquiries to our Legal Hotline rose 17% last year, while inquiries about retaliation against advisers jumped 187% over the past two years.

When a crisis emerges, they turn to our legal team. But we're more than a first responder — our work often happens behind the scenes, as we mitigate challenges and serve as a trusted partner.



PROTECTING THE RIGHT TO PUBLISH WITHOUT INTERFERENCE OR RETALIATION

When Indiana University administrators began interfering with the Indiana Daily Student's editorial independence, Student Media Director Jim Rodenbush and the IDS team knew who to call.

That trust wasn't built overnight. The Student Press Law Center's legal team has long been a steady resource for Rodenbush and his students — showing up so often that the link to our Legal Hotline auto-populates on his phone.

So, as the university began planting the seeds of eventual censorship — ultimately ordering the paper to halt printing in October 2025 and firing Rodenbush for pushing back — the Student Press Law Center was already helping IDS navigate each step in real time. Our team:

- **Guided** student editors in real time, helping them understand their options and reviewing public statements for potential legal exposure.
- **Connected** Rodenbush with a pro bono attorney who helped him file a wrongful termination lawsuit.
- **Educated** the public on the importance of student press freedom through several media interviews, including Executive Director Gary Green's conversation with CNN's Jake Tapper, which brought the story to hundreds of thousands of viewers.
- **Advocated** for student representation on the university's student media task force.

The swell of scrutiny and public pressure on Indiana administrators worked. The print issue was reinstated.



Credit: Indiana Daily Student.

But the IDS story resonated far beyond Bloomington. For student journalists and advisers, it was a reminder of what is at stake and how quickly overreach can escalate. For administrators, it was a signal that the community is organized, the public is watching and the law is on the students' side.

“Navigating the events of the fall as student editors was very daunting at first, but SPLC helped us sort through the noise and find the best way forward. It gave Andrew, the staff and I a lot more confidence to speak out and fight loudly for our organization. SPLC helped us figure out how best to convey what was happening to the rest of the world.”

—Mia Hilkowitz

Co-editor-in-chief 2025-26, the *Indiana Daily Student*



Credit: Indiana Daily Student.



We Empower Strong Student Journalism

Student journalists are navigating an increasingly complex legal and political landscape — often without the legal resources or institutional protections available to professional newsrooms. Through training, legal resources, public records support and pre-publication review, the Student Press Law Center equips students to navigate the law, assert their rights and publish powerful journalism.

ENSURING POWERFUL JOURNALISM IS VETTED AND LEGALLY SOUND

When student journalists take on serious investigative work — telling stories that would otherwise go untold — the reporting itself is only part of the challenge.

When producing a complex story or one that carries elevated legal risk, students often ask the Student Press Law Center to review their work before it's published. This confidential pre-publication vetting is a preventive measure that reduces the chance of a legal crisis occurring down the line.

In the 2025-2026 school year, Student Press Law Center attorneys vetted 73 stories reported by student journalists. For eight students at the University of Florida, who spent 16 weeks reporting a seven-part series about the connection between chemical exposure and Parkinson's disease, this pre-publication support was critical.



Student journalists conducted more than 100 interviews with Parkinson's patients, caregivers, physicians, researchers, advocates and more for the "Poisoned Pathways" investigative series, for which SPLC provided extensive pre-publication review. Photos courtesy of the University of Florida. Credit: Kairi Lowery/WUFT News.

The patients featured in the series all shared a similar concern: that their Parkinson's is linked to various chemical exposures, from farm work to military service to groundskeeping work at Disney. This meant taking on powerful, often litigious, institutions and interests.

To prepare students and their professor to publish the "[Poisoned Pathways](#)" series with confidence, the Student Press Law Center:

- **Conducted** in-depth reviews of articles through a third-party point of view.
- **Educated** students on precise language use, recommending critical adjustments in three articles that would protect both the reporter from liability while maintaining the integrity of the story.
- **Ensured** sourcing across more than 100 interviews was airtight.

After the Student Press Law Center's guidance was incorporated, "[Poisoned Pathways](#)" was published in April 2026 through WUFT, the public media station housed within the University of Florida's College of Journalism and Communications.

Because of the depth of the students' investigative reporting, Florida residents now have access to vital public health information that WUFT would not otherwise have had the capacity to produce. Their reporting has now reached approximately one million readers and listeners through WUFT and republication across other outlets.

SPLC Staff Attorney Jonathan Gaston-Falk speaks with high school journalists at the Summer Media Institute, hosted annually by the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications. Credit: Student Press Law Center.



“These were complex stories, discussing the serious impact of huge international chemical companies and major Florida-based corporations. I truly don’t know what I would have done without the Student Press Law Center’s guidance, because I would not have felt comfortable publishing these stories without their legal review. The extra layer of protection and risk management the Student Press Law Center provided helped us all sleep better at night.”

—Cynthia Barnett
Director of Climate and
Environment Reporting Initiatives,
College of Journalism and
Communications,
University of Florida

**Read the
full case study
on [SPLC.org](https://www.splc.org).**

We Amplify and Advocate for Student Voices

No one has more at stake in the fight for student press freedom than students themselves. The Student Press Law Center empowers students to fight for their rights and calls attention to the lasting impact of their reporting — adding our legal and advocacy muscle to theirs every step of the way.

Credit: New Voices Georgia.

POWERING A GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT

New Voices laws protect student journalists in 18 states from censorship by school administrators. In the rest of the country, a student-led movement is fighting for the legal protections they deserve. Through resources, trainings and programs like our New Voices Student Leaders Institute, the Student Press Law Center equips high school students with the skills to advocate for legislation in their own states.

Case in point: This past year, three institute alumni in Georgia put that training into action. Izabelle Jones, Betty Jane Plitt and Zelda Lerner spoke with lawmakers, built a coalition and helped secure the introduction of two New Voices bills — the first time in recent years that Georgia considered such protections. The Georgia students plan to build on their momentum and continue advocating when the bills are reintroduced in the next legislative session. Across the country, student advocates also pushed for New Voices legislation in Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, New York, Pennsylvania and Utah, making headway for student press freedom protections nationwide.

The Student Press Law Center powered this advocacy — and continues to do so — by training student leaders and guiding the coalitions working to bring New Voices laws to every state.

“As we built up the New Voices Georgia coalition, SPLC’s support is what helped us push forward and plan our approach. With SPLC, we knew there was always someone in our corner who could guide us on which legislators to speak with and how to start those conversations in a way that would connect with their priorities.”

—Zelda Lerner
Georgia New Voices
coalition co-leader



DEFENDING HARD-WON PROTECTIONS

Passing a New Voices law is a victory, but the threats to student press freedom don't simply go away as a result. The Student Press Law Center works to ensure those protections are upheld and that students and advisers know their rights, especially when schools test the limits.

In California, a state with longstanding student press freedom protections, those limits were tested when San Francisco's Lowell High School reassigned journalism adviser Eric Gustafson after students published reporting that made administrators uncomfortable. Right away, the Student Press Law Center was among the legal advocates in Gustafson's corner. "Talking to SPLC was really important for understanding what I could do next," he said. Our team also supported student editors as they advocated for their adviser's return.

In January 2026, a California court ruled the district had violated the state's New Voices law — the first successful test of California's adviser-protection provision since it took effect in 2009 — and ordered Gustafson reinstated.

This incident was one of more than 300 censorship cases the Student Press Law Center provided guidance on this year. Across each issue, we stood alongside students and their advisers to hold schools accountable.



Courtesy of Eric Gustafson.



Credit: Student Press Law Center.

**Read
more about
New Voices on
[SPLC.org](https://www.splc.org).**

What Comes Next



The stories in this report represent a snapshot of a single school year, but we're in this work for the long haul. Student press freedom must be defended continuously in newsrooms, classrooms, courthouses and state legislatures.

Student journalists are doing some of the most important local reporting in the country right now, and they're facing an increasingly volatile landscape. In the next year, we'll support student journalists and educators as they cover a midterm election cycle, investigate wrongdoings, build trust in their communities and help residents make better decisions about their lives.

With our [new strategic plan](#) in place, the Student Press Law Center is preparing to meet those needs by expanding our trainings and resources and strengthening partnerships that extend students' reach into their communities. We're exploring ways to scale our impact and build relationships with as many students, advisers

and educators across the country as possible. We're also continuing to tell the story of student journalism so that more lawmakers, advocates and allies know why student press freedom is worth defending and how to advance it.

Our work is possible because of our powerful community of student journalists and the advisers, attorneys, advocates and supporters who back them. Thank you for being in this work with us and believing in the power of our mission.

**Support
the Student
Press Law
Center**



Credit: New Voices Texas.



Credit: Asian American Journalists Association.



Credit: Student Press Law Center.

With Gratitude

The Student Press Law Center team is deeply grateful to the foundations, organizations and individuals who invested in our mission this past year.

A special thank you to the following supporters who have made gifts of \$5,000 or more to our organization. To view a full list of the donors who make our work possible, visit splc.org/donors.

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Journalism**

Paul and Ann Sagan

Skyline Foundation

Becky and Larry Sipos

Andrew Stark

Rosalind Stark

**University of Florida College of Journalism
and Communications**

Rob and Jody Wilson

“I’ve been supporting SPLC for several years as a longtime journalism educator and former practicing journalist. I remember my own high school and college newsroom experiences, and I know how consequential this organization is for today’s student journalists — especially in the face of relentless challenges to their First Amendment rights. Having this kind of guidance is essential for their survival.”

Linda Bowen

Donor and journalism educator

Our Team

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