



Pennsylvania School Press Association
P.O. Box 385
Manchester, PA 17345
paschoolpress.org

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To whom it may concern:

We, the Pennsylvania School Press Association, are writing to express our support for House Bill 1309: The Student Journalism Protection Act, a vital piece of legislation that aims to restore and protect the press freedoms of student journalists and their advisers across our Commonwealth.

High school journalism is arguably more important now than it has ever been. With local media outlets disappearing and the surviving newsrooms operating with smaller budgets and staffs, shrinking coverage areas create news deserts that are, more often than one might realize, filled by student journalism, especially in rural parts of the country. High school journalists cover their school board meetings, ensuing policy changes, sporting events, student life, and everything in between. Even in areas where local media outlets are able to cover some of these events, they often lack the access that is readily available to students working for their high school newspapers, yearbooks, or broadcast programs. Without the spotlight and transparency student journalism provides, these are all blindspots to the taxpaying public.

These students develop writing, editing, photography, marketing, design, teamwork, collaboration, and communication skills, all while keeping their communities informed, so long as they have the support to do so. One of the biggest challenges student journalists and their advisers face stems from a lack of understanding of the role of media and student journalism, in particular. Student publications are not newsletters, nor do they serve to promote the school or district. Rather, student journalists serve to inform their classmates, teachers, administrators, school board members, and district communities writ large by responsibly and ethically reporting the news. When school officials are not on the same page regarding that mission, funding and even entire programs sometimes unfairly hang in the balance.

Under current Pennsylvania code, school publications do have some protections, but we have found that many schools and their administrators may not follow this code. In order to ensure student First Amendment rights here in Pennsylvania, we need stronger protections for our students and their advisers. We need HB 1309.

Therefore, to ensure and support a free and robust press, the dissemination of knowledge and ideas, and government transparency, we're asking for your support for this bill, a variation of similar non-partisan "New Voices" bills that are already laws in 17 states, including our neighbors, New Jersey and West Virginia. These protections are needed because, without them, school administrators can (and do) censor many student publications for "any reasonable pedagogical purpose" (*Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier, 1988*). The fear of retribution against their programs or adviser causes even more students to self-censor. Censoring students not only quells their engagement in the life of their community, but sends a clear message that their voices are not valued and respected. It also prevents their vital reporting from reaching their district communities.

Thank you for your consideration of HB 1309 and Pennsylvania's student journalists and advisers.

Respectfully,

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