

Students press lawmakers on school censorship

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Student journalists and advisors told state lawmakers last week a series of horror stories about administrators censoring newspapers — ripping out entire articles, editorials, photos and pages.

"There was no reason given except 'This is not what Rochester High is all about,'" said Bryce Sandler, now a Michigan State University student.

Sandler said the administration censored much of his material on a grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan, though he had seen Nazi swastikas in student lockers and heard racial epithets in school.

"At many high schools, students are spoon-fed their entire work day, they are told how to act, where and when to eat, when to come and go, and even what to think and say," said Matthew Vandura on behalf of Troy Athens High students.

"If all these things are already done for us, and no one is giving us the chance to assume any type of responsibility on our own, how are we supposed to become mature adults?"

"CENSORSHIP IS everywhere in our educational system," said Heather Lewis, an editor of three Royal Oak Kimball publications.

When 40 seniors including honor society members and football players — were arrested for misconduct in a scavenger hunt, Lewis said, their names were published in three daily papers, "but the Kimball Herald could not print it."

Mark Goodman, an attorney and executive director of the Student Press Law Center in Washington, said requests for legal assistance rose from 588 in 1988 — the year a Supreme Court decision curtailed the student press — to 1,000 now, "80 percent for actual or threatened

censorship."

These included administrators killing stories on a coach who pocketed \$1,000, a report on AIDS ("you can't mention sex in a student paper"), a school employee charged with 11 counts of child sex abuse ("a very sensitive issue"), and pro-life and Christian points of view.

FOR THREE hours, the House Judiciary Committee heard testimony, mostly in favor of House Bill 4565, protecting "student freedom of expression."

Sponsor Lynn Jondahl, D-Oakemos, said the purpose is to protect not only student papers but arm bands, theater productions and bulletin boards. Most of the testimony, however, was on newspapers, which Jondahl's bill would protect from administrative censorship and emphasize the role of the faculty adviser.

"It will undermine the ability of teachers, administrators and school

boards to keep order," objected Jim Ballard of the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals. He said T-shirts — "winking billboards" — would advocate free sex, drugs and liquor without administrative control.

Ray Telman, of the Michigan Association of School Administrators, said one censorship incident occurred because students in a Macomb district were offended at an article.

Asked Judiciary chair Perry Bulard, D-Ann Arbor, a champion of the bill, "If the First Amendment does not protect speech we hate, what good is it?"

Replied Telman: "I trust the good judgment of a principal."

DENOUNCING pro-censorship arguments as "crap," Oakland University Professor Jane Briggs-Bunting said administrators are exceeding the authority given them by the Supreme Court's 1988 Hazelwood decision.

slon. "The reality is these kids are getting censored right and left," said Briggs-Bunting, adviser to the OU student paper. "These kids are into self-censorship, big time. We are muzzling these kids."

She said self-imposed censorship increased markedly after Hazelwood.

"Student newspapers are learning grounds," said Plymouth publisher Edward Wendover. "We need to make them as close as possible to the real world."

Wendover, who has taught at three colleges and advises his daughter's student paper, said censorship in the 1980s led students to use the non-school underground press and flyers.

Stephen Goldstein, local board member of the Society of Professional Journalists, said the group wholeheartedly endorses the bill and is dismayed that some newspaper editors support the high court censorship decision.

"Public schools are an agent of government" and shouldn't be in the newspaper business, he added.

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Farmington Hills Library, 32737 W. 12 Mile Rd., Farmington Hills, 48415-0300.

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