

# Advisers back press freedom for students

By Janice Brunson  
staff writer

Some Oakland County teachers who serve as advisers to high school publications unanimously support legislation guaranteeing freedom of expression for students although they say they enjoy such freedom now without fear of administrative censorship.

And while many publications advisers and students support the bill, principals and administrators generally oppose it.

Both the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals and the Michigan Association of School Administrators have taken official stands against House Bill 4565 "Freedom of Expression," intro-

duced by state Rep. Lynn Jondahl, D-Oakman.

The bill, currently in the House judiciary committee, calls for freedom of speech without prior review or censorship except when it interferes with normal school activities.

Currently, a 1988 Supreme Court decision known as Hazelwood grants school officials the right to review or censor student expression.

"I support (the proposed law)," said Kathy Nyberg who for 20 years has taught journalism at Harrison High School in Farmington Hills where she is adviser to the school's newspaper, *The Catalyst*.

"I support it because I realize that not all advisers are working under the same conditions as I am," Ny-

berg said that following Hazelwood, there was no noticeable change in press freedom at Harrison. If a story that is sensitive in nature is scheduled to appear in *The Catalyst*, she alerts the principal as a matter of courtesy. She is not required to do so.

"A COOPERATIVE SITUATION," is how Bill Christman describes his working relationship with school administrators since Hazelwood. Christman teaches journalism at Lahser High in Bloomfield Hills and is adviser to the school newspaper, *The Page*.

If students were to suggest a story on a controversial issue, "I'd support it and see how we could go about doing it," Christman said. He would also consult the school principal be-

cause "I'd want to run it by him and make him aware."

Harriet Maza of West Bloomfield High School takes a different approach. Maza has taught journalism at the school seven years and advises the school's award-winning newspaper, *The Spectrum*.

When she finds students on "tenuous" journalistic ground, "when we're not quite sure how to put it together or not certain of its legality," she consults professionals outside the school.

Maza contacts the Student Press Law Center in Washington, D.C., or the Michigan Interscholastic Press Association at Michigan State University in East Lansing which is lobbying for passage of the Freedom of Expression law here.

Otherwise, Maza, who is a regional director for the Interscholastic Association, said "we operate by the association's code of ethics which is pretty standard stuff." All members of the Spectrum staff have completed a course in writing which contains an ethics unit.

"MY PRINCIPAL doesn't even look at the paper before it goes to press," said Kyle Hill, journalism adviser to *The Highlander* at Seaholm High School in Birmingham.

Last year, when students wrote a controversial editorial questioning the academic value of certain classes, Hill's principal wrote a letter to the editor disagreeing with *The Highlander* point of view. He also reiterated the right of press freedom, Hill said.

Elaine Shapiro, who for 20 years has taught journalism at Troy High School where she is adviser to the school's news magazine, *The Northend*, stresses trust in her relationship with school administrators.

"My principal has not used Hazelwood at all. There is a trust here. We teach responsible journalism, good taste, ethics and libel, and he trusts us to remain within the law," Shapiro said.

Currently, student editors are considering an editorial about a contro-

versial new school rule banning bottles from campus that can be re-capped. Aimed at curtailing the use of alcohol in school, student editors are not entirely convinced the new rule is necessary or reasonable.

But the freedom to investigate relevant stories has not always been so at Troy High, according to Shapiro. In early 1984, prior to the Hazelwood ruling, a previous principal attempted to squash a story on birth control. The story ran after the school attorney found students were guaranteed freedom of expression under a 1969 Supreme Court ruling.

Educators point to an incident that occurred in an Oakland County high school following the Hazelwood ruling. A story on recycling, criticizing the use of polystyrene cups in the school cafeteria, was killed by principal empowered by Hazelwood.

English teacher Robert Filar of Southfield-Lathrup High School, who teaches journalism and is adviser to *The Charger*, sees a need for change in the school's irregularly published tabloid.

"We haven't done much of a controversial nature. We haven't had the capability or interest. But I keep encouraging it because it makes for more interesting reading," said Filar who is squarely behind Freedom of Expression.

## ... surveys reflect mixed views

Despite school newspaper advisers' claims to the contrary, does the hidden hand of censorship affect their news judgment?

On that, two recent surveys disagree.

Censorship isn't a problem, said three-quarters of the 72 advisers responding to one recent survey.

The vast majority of advisers said censorship wasn't a problem before the Hazelwood ruling, and it hasn't been a problem since, according to Susan Kala Flewelling, who researched the topic for her master's thesis at Michigan State University.

Flewelling, a former student publications adviser at Regina High School, asked 117 member of the Michigan Interscholastic Press Association whether the Hazelwood case has resulted in increased self-

censorship, a change in adviser role and decreased coverage of controversial topics. Her research was conducted in February 1991. Seventy-two of the 117 who were mailed surveys responded.

But even though the 60 percent response rate is generally deemed more than acceptable, some 45 advisers failed to respond.

Another survey found vastly different results.

BARBARA GOFFMAN, whose survey served as her senior honors thesis in communications at the University of Michigan, found Hazelwood had a chilling effect — even to the point of blurring the lines between news and school district public relations.

"If high school journalism is teaching teenagers to ignore real

problems and to prohibit publication of unpopular views, then it has certainly taken a wrong turn," Goffman said.

Goffman surveyed 250 school newspaper editors and faculty advisers to determine the extent to which Michigan high school journalists recognize and practice their First Amendment rights.

Half of the student editors Goffman surveyed said they had experienced censorship since the Hazelwood ruling, most often of factually correct but controversial stories. Most often the censorship was done by principals.

The outcome of Hazelwood, Goffman warned, could lead to even greater self-censorship. Nine percent of student editors she polled said they would suppress controver-

sial opinions submitted to their paper.

EVEN MORE DISTURBING, Goffman believed, is her finding that 14 percent of advisers and 25 percent of student editors said their paper's primary function was to serve as a public relations vehicle for the school.

"Hazelwood has basically" given public school principals a green light to turn all school newspapers into public relations sheets," Goffman said.

Goffman said she supports a bill introduced by Michigan state Rep. Lynn Jondahl in March 1991 that would override Hazelwood and make censorship of student expression illegal in Michigan, except when it interferes with normal school activities.

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