

# Adviser Role

## 6 steps to advising an open forum & defending press rights

Although curriculum, budgets, classroom set-up and student press policies are all important, nothing is more important than making sure you understand your rights and limitations as an adviser. Protecting yourself from the decisions your staff may make means arming yourself with knowledge and building a solid policy.

It is not easy. And the answers to questions about adviser rights are not as clearly stated as those involving student press rights. The short answer? The Colorado statute does not provide protection for the adviser. *Solution:* cover your bases and let the students walk the walk. Put them in the best position to practice free press and to defend it if it comes under fire.

### 1. Make resources available to your principal // develop a relationship with your admin

The SPLC and state organizations both have clear documentation of scholastic press rights and responsibilities. Get your principal a “Principal’s Guide to Scholastic Journalism.” Make sure she understands that your students are operating under the state statutes and the First Amendment rights that protect high school journalists. Also make sure she understands that your students make the content decisions. Develop a relationship of trust and professionalism with your administration by presenting your program and updating them on changes.

### 2. Develop a policy

Is there a student publication policy in place at the school? What, if any, policies have been in place in the past. Make sure you look carefully at the student handbook, the district policies, and the employee handbook. Look for wording that speaks to publication rights and responsibilities and teacher rights and responsibilities. Develop or revise a policy for the student publication that is founded on the principals of scholastic journalism press rights and state constitutions. Develop an open forum that clearly states that the students make the content decisions and the adviser cannot make content decisions. Establish clearly that there shall be no prior review by any school officials.

### 3. Teach your students about the 1st Amendment and their rights as student journalists.

When it really comes to it, if an administrator challenges the First Amendment in your school by threatening to censor student publication, your students are the ones who will need to fight the fight. As an adviser you want to let them do the talking with lawyers and state organizations. You will be behind the scenes just as you should always be behind the scenes. If your students are prepared, they will be fighting against censorship and holding their ground for the right to produce quality journalism.

### 4. Let the students make the decisions. Establish an open forum.

Teach the skills. Advise the decisions. But do not make them. Be an advice-giver not an advice-doer. The most powerful part of education is when a student makes a decision on his or her own. When they own it. So let them own it. The student publication is for students by students. Make it very clear from the beginning and remain consistent: This is the students’ paper. You do not decide, you do not approve; you do not edit, you do not report, write, take photographs, or sell advertisements. And don’t allow any other adults to do any of the above either. Doing so will be a good way to lose that status as an open forum. But DO make sure the staff opens the paper up to the entire student body. Develop a policy for letters to the editor, freelancers, and other contributors. Allow the entire student body to own it.

### 5. Join organizations that will support you.

If you’ve never thought about joining your union, now that you are an adviser might be a good time. You are going to want someone to stand up for you when the state statute that protects the students falls short. Join your local and national high school press associations too. Surround yourself with like-minded people who will be there for you when you need them.

### 6. Go professional

The best way to ensure a free press? Produce a world class product. If you can teach, inspire, and foster a culture of professionalism, dedication, and competition, the rest will take care of itself. Join all of the organizations, workshops, conferences, and competitions you can. Provide opportunities for your students to succeed on the biggest stage. Build a community around an excellent, well-crafted, award-winning product, and the publication will speak for itself.