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Guest Column

I Didn't Always Think Well of the Student Press

by Michael Murray

I was not always a champion of freedom of the press for high school newspapers.

When the editors of the school newspaper wanted to name the culprits in a high-profile disciplinary case, I argued that my role as principal was to ensure the success of each student. The public shaming would create an atmosphere where the students would not want to return.

Using the standards set by the U.S. Supreme court in its 1988 ruling in the *Hazelwood* case, I argued the student newspaper was not a public forum, nor did the publishing of student names further the school's educational goals. The editors and I were on opposite sides of the matter. The adviser, not yet tenured, was put in an extremely awkward spot.

Life has a way of throwing events in your path that provide an opportunity to grow or to fossilize.

Confrontational Start

The controversial coverage involved an incident that had taken place at 2 a.m. on a Sunday morning. Students from my high school confronted students from a prominent private school in a parking lot of a junior high to settle a long-simmering feud that had erupted several times on the basketball courts over the previous two years.

The nature of the dispute escalated rapidly when bat-wielding students from the private school emerged from the nearby woods, and one of the public school students ended up in the emergency room with a broken jaw. Several of the private school students were members of a football team contending for a state title.

The local newspaper, the high school paper and the private school's newspaper did not cover the confrontation. The police were stymied by the lack of identities to question. The junior high school students under my charge had eyewitness reports and wanted to cover the story in detail. The superintendent directed us to leave the story alone.

Powerful Point

That is the moment when it became clear to me these young people were going to be learning a powerful lesson about journalism. Is the truth subordinate to political expediency and interest groups? How much are reporters willing to risk to print the truth?

Print it they did, amidst a great deal of emotion and controversy. The local daily then picked up the story and followed it

through to the court appearances of two student perpetrators.

If I thought that active backing of the editors of the school paper would make me a hero in the eyes of the students, I was quite mistaken.

At the end of the school year, the 9th graders do a rite of passage known as the Freshman Project. The mother of the editor-in-chief sought me out during the displays to be sure I read her daughter's project on freedom of the student press. The student's message was that I always stressed that people should be judged on what they do, not by what they say. The fact I reviewed the content of each issue before it went to press said a lot about the level of respect and trust I had for the student journalists.

This epiphany led to my next revelation about dealing with student publications. The community expected the principal be in firm control of the school. This meant ensuring nothing controversial or unpopular ever appeared in the school press. In an active community, on almost any issue, there is guaranteed to be a faction that feels the school has no right to express a viewpoint contrary to its espoused beliefs.

Until then, principals in our school district had routinely reviewed student content prior to publication to ensure nothing in print would upset anyone. Consequently, the student paper sat in piles untouched as no students had any interest in reading it. Students viewed the newspaper as little more than student-produced fluff.

Trust Building

The idea of being a censor rankled me on several levels. From a practical standpoint, censorship simply doesn't work. Today's generation of students is so connected through the cyber world that word travels almost at the speed of thought. MySpace, FaceBook, text messaging, instant messaging, cell phone conversations, photos, videos and You Tube videos all have proven too powerful for even the most advanced dictatorships of the world to control.

Students judge adults by what they do, not by what they say. How can an educational leader teach responsible journalism and free press unless the practice reflects the stated philosophical position? There had to be a better way.

As it turns out, there is, but it requires a lot more investment of time and energy. The first step is to establish a relationship with students based on respect and trust. This does not happen overnight but is the cumulative result of decisions and actions.

The next step is to create a culture in the school and, most importantly, in the journalism classes where intellectual curiosity and critical thinking are celebrated. Student culture must be infused with the desire to examine ideas in terms of critical thinking principles: clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance and fairness.

Finally, a structure must be created in school to support mutual respect and understanding of differing viewpoints. In my case, the journalism class asked for regular press conferences with me so that ideas could be discussed, and the complexity of issues could be explained before stories were completed for the next issue of the newspaper.

On distribution day, I would receive my copy at the same time as the rest of the school with little knowledge of what was covered. From time to time, the student journalists would criticize a school policy or a decision I had made as principal. Still, I felt a sense of pride these criticisms followed a free exchange of ideas that's essential to a democracy, and the articles were written after the students considered opposing viewpoints.

These students are well on their way to becoming the type of citizens we all reference in our vision statements. Being the occasional target of student criticism is a small price to pay for achieving that goal.

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