

Action Plan

preparing & responding to complaints

Diminishing the likelihood of being successfully sued:

I. Establish the focus of the paper: OPEN FORUM

Student journalists: determine the content of your media. Be the voice of your publication. Establish professional rapport.

Adviser: make sure the students make content decisions. From the story meeting to the printer, allow for them to define their paper.

Administration: Allow for a free student press. Trust the adviser and the students to produce sound journalism. Understand that they will express opinions, investigate, and criticize. Support an open forum by refraining from prior review and censorship.

II. Understand your responsibilities: JOURNALISTIC SKILLS

Student journalists: Review material to improve writing structure and skills; produce media based on accuracy, objectivity and fairness; Check and verify all facts and quotations; avoid material that:
-is obscene as to minors; is libelous; is material that will cause “a material and substantial disruption of school activities”; is copyrighted without direct, given permission; invades privacy.

Adviser: require student journalists to triangulate and check their sources and facts. Teach the law, from freedom of expression and copyright to invasion of privacy, libel, slander, defamation and obscenity. Advise the students on making legal and ethical decisions.

Administration: Support an academic journalism program. Make journalistic skills part of the curriculum. Celebrate the First Amendment school-wide with programs and speakers. Educate the student body on their rights and their responsibilities as citizens.

Responding to a complaint

I. Always be prepared

There should be one of the senior editors on the staff (one that is good with people) who responds first to all claims or complaints. Advisers should stay clear.

- 1> Take all claims seriously
- 2> Document everything & assume everything you do and say is being documented
- 3> Listen carefully & be polite at all times
- 4> Let the administration & the adviser know right away

II. Reach out & follow through

After taking the complaint, the senior editor should inform the adviser & the proper advocacy contacts and lawyers.

- 1> Contact your local high school press association advocacy coordinator or president and ask for assistance & support
- 2> Contact the Student Press Law Center for consult and support
- 3> Follow the direction of the coordinators and lawyers
- 4> The adviser should remain in the background. The adviser should contact his or her representative at the union if necessary
- 5> The students should go to the administration and be a conduit between the lawyers and the admin