

Journalism starts and ends with high schoolers — support high school journalism

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Every spring, I attend the Journalism Education Association's annual conferences. These meetings, held in elegant ballrooms with thousands of journalists, are meant to inspire, inform and advise. They show young journalists the power of their voice through sessions on writing, design and leadership.

In spring of 2024, I definitely learned a lot. But it wasn't what I was expecting.

Sitting next to a stranger from Texas, we got to talking. I learned of the immense censorship occurring on her campus — how, backed by administration, her very adviser was editing the newspaper to fit his political views.

And, so, I entered the world of press rights and censorship.

In my hometown of St. Louis, Missouri, I'm lucky. We have a very supportive administration and adviser that lets us write about what we believe in without risk of retaliation.

But many aren't so lucky. Across the country, students are being expelled and reprimanded, or advisers are being laid off by administration due to widespread censorship. Even in my hometown of St. Louis, a local school board member attempted to take away the journalism adviser's stipend.

We need journalism. It is at the very center of American values — without journalism, democracy itself will cease to exist. We need journalists to report the hard, undeniable truths of the world — whether that's a local classroom change, a statewide bill or a nationwide corruption charge.

When I wrote my first story, I was unsure. Hesitant. It's a writing style that is rarely taught in schools — instead of a 5-paragraph essay, journalism has quotes and transitions. Forget studying ancient literary figures, reporters are more interested in being out in the field, uncovering the stories that matter in the present day. Journalism opened my eyes to things previously unimaginable — a world in which I could write, campaign and convince, all while bolstering another's narrative.

But this work is dying. According to a Quinnipiac University poll in 2022, 67% of Americans believe that journalism is near collapse.

In Missouri, failure to pass the Cronkite New Voices Act has allowed school officials to censor content, with students sometimes suffering suspension or expulsion for their work. The United States touts its First Amendment, but turns a blind eye to legal and violent harassment of journalists. In addition, social media platforms create echo chambers — parroting what one already believes and nullifying journalism's emphasis of reporting controversy. In political campaigns, politicians alter the narrative to support their interests. After all, it's easier to influence voters when they're fed a half truth, one that supports a singular worldview.

To counter this, our strongest tool is journalism.

While the challenges are immense, they must be weathered, because all communities deserve accurate representation and recognition. Missouri must pass the Cronkite New Voices act to protect its student journalists and advisers. States across the country must join the 14 New Voices States in pledging their support for journalism.

The Student Press Law Center, a nonprofit, is already doing this kind of work. They host a yearly New Voices Institute, allowing students to learn about their student press protections and what must be done to ensure all journalists are protected.

So email the SPLC. Educate yourself about the state of New Voices and press law in your state. Ensure that no student has to go through what my friend from Texas did. After all, a threat to press freedom somewhere is a threat to press freedom everywhere. Right now, journalism is near collapse. Don't let this vital part of our democracy suffer any longer.