Editorial pressure scenarios

A role-play for student editors
Editorial Leadership · CSPA summer course
Columbia University · New York

CSPA Editorial Leadership

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Take a role, then examine the decision

The roles

One administrator, one adviser, and two student editors. Use a hypothetical editorial or a draft you have permission to discuss.

The format

Spend five minutes on each scenario, then explain the reasoning behind your response.

Ask every time

What happened? What is the specific objection? What do editors and the adviser each do next?

Use the press-law companion

School type, state law, policy, and forum practice matter. The scenario alone does not decide legality.

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Scenario 1 · A request to read first

What happens

The principal hears that an editorial is hard-hitting and asks to read it before publication: “No promises about changes. I just want to see it.”

The editors

What does policy say about prior review? Can you request comment or check a disputed fact without handing over editorial control?

The adviser

How can you support students, identify a real legal concern, and document the request? What protections and responsibilities apply?

Your response

State what you can offer and which policy question needs to be resolved.

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Scenario 2 · An order to pull the story

What happens

Two days before publication, the principal orders the editorial removed as “not appropriate right now,” without a specific objection.

The editors

Ask for the objection and authority in writing. Preserve drafts and reporting. Identify applicable law, policy, and the publication’s actual status.

The adviser

Support students without taking their editorial role. Record what was said and consider seeking SPLC help.

Your response

Explain the next step calmly. Do not assume Hazelwood or a New Voices law settles the facts without further analysis.

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Scenario 3 · A demand for an apology

What happens

An administrator demands a retraction after a critical editorial runs. Editors believe the facts are accurate and offered a meaningful chance to respond.

The adviser

Help preserve sourcing and correspondence. Coach the staff through its review and seek qualified help if needed.

The editors

Recheck the specific facts. Apply the corrections policy. Distinguish an error from disagreement with a position.

Your response

If there is an error, correct it transparently. If uncertainty remains, investigate it rather than promising a result in advance.

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Try the pressure on your own editorial

01 Choose a hypothetical parent campaign, source's legal threat, social-media attack, or budget cut.

02 Role-play a five-minute conversation. Repeat with students in different roles.

03 Debrief the facts, policy, options, and support you would need.

WORKING TIME

15 minutes

YOU WILL PRODUCE

A response plan and one question to take to the press-law discussion.

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