Know your context.
Know your rights.

Student press freedom
Editorial Leadership · CSPA summer course
Columbia University · New York

CSPA Editorial Leadership

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Begin with your actual context

Ask before assuming

School type, jurisdiction, school sponsorship, forum status, and the nature of the speech can change the analysis.

Prepare a record

Save the policy, relevant correspondence, the story, and your reporting notes.

Use this as a framework

These slides introduce the questions. SPLC can help apply them to a real dispute.

Your goal

Identify the specific source of protection you can point to, rather than relying on a slogan.

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Public and private schools differ

Public schools

Government actors are subject to the First Amendment. The legal standard depends on the kind of speech and publication, as well as state law.

Private schools

The First Amendment generally does not bind them directly. State statutes, contracts, policies, and school promises may provide protections.

Do not stop at one case

Tinker and Hazelwood are central to student media, but they do not describe every student-speech situation.

Check the details

California is an important example of statutory protections that can reach some private-school expression. Coverage and exceptions matter.

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Tinker v. Des Moines · 1969

The case

Students wore black armbands to protest the Vietnam War. The Supreme Court ruled 7–2 in their favor.

The principle

Undifferentiated fear or discomfort with a viewpoint is not enough to suppress protected student expression.

The standard

The decision discusses material and substantial disruption and the rights of others.

For an editor

Ask what evidence supports the claimed disruption. Do not assume that controversy itself meets the standard.

Read the court decision ↗

Slides & resource links ↗

Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier · 1988

The case

A principal removed pages containing articles about pregnancy and divorce from a school-sponsored student newspaper. The Court ruled 5–3 for the school.

The standard

Editorial control of covered school-sponsored expression must be reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns.

The distinction

The Court treated the publication as a supervised curricular activity rather than a forum for student expression.

For an editor

School sponsorship, forum policy and practice, state law, and the stated educational reason all matter.

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Five questions to investigate

1 · School and jurisdiction

Public or private? Which state statutes, regulations, contracts, and school policies apply?

2 · State student-press protection

Is the publication and the student covered by a New Voices law or another protection?

3 · Forum status

Do policy and practice give student editors authority over content?

4 · School sponsorship

Is this curricular, school-sponsored expression to which Hazelwood may apply?

5 · The actual content and objection

What legal issue or educational rationale is claimed? Does the evidence support it?

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New Voices adds state protection

The movement

SPLC supports student-led efforts to strengthen student press rights through state law.

The published tracker

SPLC lists 18 states with laws protecting public high school student journalists as of October 24, 2026.

Read your state's text

Coverage, exceptions, remedies, and adviser protections vary.

Other protections

Virginia's listed law covers college students; Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C., have relevant administrative rules.

Explore the New Voices tracker ↗

Slides & resource links ↗

The 18 states on SPLC’s tracker

Arkansas · California · Colorado

Hawaii · Illinois · Iowa

Kansas · Maryland · Massachusetts

Minnesota · Nevada · New Jersey

North Dakota · Oregon · Rhode Island

Vermont · Washington · West Virginia

A dated reference

This list reflects SPLC’s tracker checked October 24, 2026. Use the live tracker for changes.

A state is not the whole answer

Verify who is covered and how the law applies to your specific publication.

Explore the New Voices tracker ↗

Slides & resource links ↗

Check a law’s actual coverage

Who is covered?

Public high school? College? A particular kind of publication or student activity?

What is protected?

Who controls editorial decisions? What exceptions or procedures does the text name?

What happens after interference?

Look for remedies and any adviser protections. Do not assume every law uses the same language.

Get help applying it

Keep a copy of the law and ask SPLC about the facts of a particular dispute.

Explore the New Voices tracker ↗

Slides & resource links ↗

Build private-school commitments

Start with existing protections

Read state law, enrollment agreements, publication policies, and promises about student expression.

Make the commitment explicit

A school that values critical thinking can explain how students will exercise editorial judgment in practice.

What PSJA is trying to accomplish

More private and independent schools with a meaningful student press, supported advisers, and public commitments that outlast one supportive administrator.

A school-specific process

Discuss language, mission, scope, and implementation rather than assuming a model automatically governs.

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What the PSJA Model Affirmation means

A voluntary commitment

Student expression, adviser advocacy, and clear protections, with defined exceptions.

Developed with expertise

Chief author Erica Salkin, with review by PSJA and SPLC.

Adopt and implement

A school commitment, not a statute; terms and applicable law determine its effect.



Judith Guild · Head of School, Brimmer and May

Read the full Model Affirmation ↗

Slides & resource links ↗

Know where to ask for help

Student Press Law Center

Legal information, a legal-help request service, model policies, and New Voices resources.

Private School Journalism Association

Resources, connections, recognition, and the Model Affirmation for private-school journalism.

Bring useful information

Your school type, location, publication policy, the proposed or published work, and a written account of the objection.

Keep the record

Preserve drafts and correspondence. Distinguish a correction request from pressure over a viewpoint.

Get help from SPLC ↗

Slides & resource links ↗

Analyze one publication and one dispute

01 Identify the school type, jurisdiction, relevant policies, and forum practice.

02 Use the five questions to analyze a real or hypothetical objection. Record what you know and what remains uncertain.

03 Write a measured response that identifies the actual policy or legal question.

WORKING TIME

20 minutes

YOU WILL PRODUCE

A source-linked analysis and a specific question for SPLC or another qualified adviser.

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Leave with a reference you can use

Know the source of authority

Keep the law, policy, contract, or adopted commitment you are relying on.

Pair independence with responsibility

Verify, seek a response, consider harm, and correct errors transparently.

Live resources

splc.org/new-voices
splc.org/legalhelp
ps-ja.com

Course materials

Use the companion page for slides, a PDF, and the editorial-pressure activities.

Open slides and resources ↗