A high school news advisers' preemptive trouble-shooting guide

Introduction

Consider it inevitable.

During your tenure as a high school newspaper adviser, your staff will entertain a topic that invites intense scrutiny from your principal, school board or superintendent – and maybe all of them.

That scrutiny, in fact, may even develop into a full-blown official desire to change or control that story or picture or graphic, if not quash it.

Count on it.

Statement

If you talk with 100 advisers, 100 will tell you they've run into this, some scenarios more serious than others. It's an uncomfortable situation for the adviser, the staff, and even the brass. That said, the Supreme Court, with its 1988 *Hazelwood* decision, gave administrators qualified authority to render final judgment on the publication of information and stories they deem contrary to the educational process. Some honor that, while many others go too far.

Botton line: In some situations they're the final word, and you can't ignore them. In others, educational arguments, as well as legal ones, will win the day.

Welcome to the world of American journalism, where everyone from the high school writer and adviser to the professional reporter and city

editor must occasionally face the wrath of a higher authority, be it a principal worried about agitated parents or a perturbed superintendent, or a professional publisher concerned about a demanding advertiser or country club pals.

The potential of controversy doesn't need to cast such a shadow, however. The best publications anticipate problems and are prepared when they arise. After all, no less than credibility with the audience is at stake if you publish only those things the publisher allows. So, you'd better have a plan to minimize that chance. And, in scholastic situations, administrators are also agents of the state and not exactly the same authority as a private publisher.

In general, you'll need to prepare yourself on three fronts: your students, your brass and yourself. You need to instill in your students the importance of acting in a professional manner when they do their journalistic duties. You need to build a relationship with the administration that will allow you to navigate stormy times. Finally, you need to keep yourself up to speed on developments in journalism and arm yourself with tools to short-circuit potential problems. These things come before, during and forevermore. This is how you avoid disagreements that lead to such court cases as *Hazelwood*.

You and your students

Nothing makes a principal, superintendent or school board more confident than competence. The competence they sense in their faculty, staff and students means, for them, one less worry in a world of it.

You want them to be confident that they can scratch the school's publication from that list of worrisome things. You want to have the correct notion that the school's young journalists will perform responsibly at all times. But if school authorities still get edgy, you want to make sure your students' work is so good that censoring it, or even altering it, will appear to be the worst of all evils.

The potential for controversy is established in little ways. It doesn't always come with such sensitive topics as pregnancy, molestation, drug-trading, crime, drinking, suicides and divorce, but on the routine stuff, like this:

- Do the reporters spell names correctly? Does their math add up?
- Are they accurate with who, what, when, where, why and how?

● Do they refrain from inserting their opinions in news and features and instead seek the views of people who know more?
● When they do offer opinions, are they built upon solid research?
● Do they present themselves professionally?
● Do they know the law, from defamation to sunshine?
● Do they behave ethically?

If you can't get these things right, how confident can the brass be when your kids want to try the big stuff? Not very. So, establish yourself on the basics and the sticky stuff will be less sticky, if not downright smooth.

In fact, never count on smooth. Even in the best of times and circumstances, administrators worry about legalities, about the impressions serious topics may leave on young minds, about bad relations with parents and the public. We all know that the First Amendment gives us the right to say pretty much anything we want to say, even if it's irresponsible or dangerous, but school journalism is not a matter of rights; *Hazelwood* told us that. Rather, your concern must be to prepare your students to do the job as solidly as possibly every single time so that the administration never has a valid reason to say "no." In essence, then, the issues becomes one of ethical questions, something your students should ask themselves on every story.

The real trick is you'll need to keep your hand out of the actual work. That's harder than it may appear.

A properly operating school publication is the responsibility of students. That said, when the administration becomes concerned about something the student magazine or newspaper plans to publish, the adviser will get the call. Why? Because you are the agent of the administration, hired as a teacher and appointed as an adviser to teach proper journalistic techniques and practices. Unfortunately (and, sometimes, uncomfortably, for you), the administration wants to take it upon itself to define "proper," and sometimes it has nothing to do with proper journalism.

Of course, this puts you in a squeeze between the employer who pays you and the students the employer has charged you with properly teaching. Your instinct may be to involve yourself more than you should. The more you do that, though, the less "student" there is in student publication.

While it is not the role of the adviser to assign stories or otherwise direct the school publication, it is the adviser's job to teach the skills that will allow students to do quality work. Of course, this all means you'll need to be sure you know what you're doing, and this, in turn, might mean your own return to school for a journalism update.

If you're in command of the subject, you'll understand how many skills your students must master, from law to ethics, from observation and understanding to defining a tight angle, from interviewing and researching to writing news and features and opinion, from editing to designing and headlining, from advertising to circulation. As much as the world of communications is changing, these basics remain the same. They require responsibility, clear-headedness, fairness and the ability to communicate a clear message.

When your young charges reach the point of competency, you'll push them out of your nest. That's the only way they'll turn those tools into skills, and you will have taught them enough about responsibility to know when their work isn't good enough for publication.

If you have to grade the students on their work, don't underestimate the value of grading, but always talk grades in the form of critique, not in the way of shaping content. That means two primary questions:

1. What did you do well?
2. How could you have done better?

The first question recognizes good work and cements good practices into place. The second is a constructive way to begin improvements. It certainly beats, "How did you screw up?"

As with work reviews for practitioners at commercial media companies, this is a means for conditioning student journalists to write stories that are well-sourced, tightly written and focused on an audience's primary question at a given moment. It is also a way to teach editors how to ensure that only quality work reaches the pages of your school publication. This is the ideal time to stress to your students that they will never work for a credible publication that allows them to write anything and any way they want. Quality journalism has a much greater chance for publication and reaching readers.

Another way to ensure greater consistency in your publication is to help your students develop a staff manual that will lay out the how-to information covering everything from news-, feature-, review- and

editorial-writing, to how to take a picture, to page-design and caption-writing to advertising sales and newspaper circulation. It will include the Sunshine laws and the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Professional Conduct. It will even carry a list of every staff member's phone number – a how-to on reaching your people in a pinch.

Your hand never need touch the paper, but your imprint will be on the publication by way of the training and preparation you've provided. To help with this, you might look at JEA's Adviser Code of Ethics.

Creating a professional imprint takes time. It may frustrate your students if they can't publish right away, but they must be taught to understand the danger of publishing before a story is ready. And they need to understand that building a record of competency will also build the road to trust.

You and your administration

This will be your biggest test, but if you pass, you'll find it the best use of your role as adviser.

The biggest problem for administrators is that they don't understand the various roles or the potential of the school publication:

- That it is a great integrator of disciplines taught every day throughout your school.
- That it's a great tool for developing critical thinking skills.
- That it improves communication skills, chiefly writing, researching and reporting.
- That it provides a forum where students can communicate with each other about things they care about. This provides a sense of community.
- That it is where the First Amendment plays out in your school and can foster a sense of citizenship and participation among students.
- That is provides the various local communities with an accurate and responsible account of school activities, issues and problems.
- Thorough, accurate and complete reporting is honest and provides a framework for informed citizens to vote, and to participate responsibly in society.

The goal with your principal is to keep talking. That doesn't mean you need, or even should, let him or her in on the staff's monthly story plans – that's only inviting trouble – but you and your students should talk regularly about the importance of the school paper and journalism.

Here are a few ways into this …

Quill & Scroll, the international journalism honorary society, sent principals throughout the nation a copy of its manual, "Principals' Guide to Scholastic Journalism." Copies are still available by contacting Quill and Scroll. Usually, the principal will open this package, see what it is and hand it off to the adviser. It doesn't hurt the adviser to know what's in it, but that doesn't make the principal any the wiser. Remind the principal that the manual is a "Principals' Guide" and that you should go over it together. Plan a regular sit-down with the principal to discuss the guide's key points; you may come to an understanding as to what to do when a tough moment arises, and what those tough moments might be. You might even come to an understanding of how each of you might react under certain circumstances, and that you might agree to disagree. In any case, discussion beforehand may make an argument later unnecessary. The "Guide" can help frame the discussion.?

Discuss your school district's publication policy. What does it mean to your principal and superintendent, and what does it mean to you? Is it clear? Does it comply with your understanding Hazelwood, Tinker and other court decisions? What does it expect from and allow student publications? Is it written as it should be? Does it encourage student learning and empower student decision-making?

This may be a good time to make your administrators aware of the Student Press Law Center as a resource on sticky questions. The SPLC is the only organization in the nation totally devoted to issues of student expression, and it can serve administrative inquiry as well as adviser and student inquiries. It also can connect an inquirer to other expert resources. Too many simply see the SPLC as advocates of something they are not familiar with, an attitude that often leads to conflict instead of collaboration and co-operation.

Also, help get them acquainted with the most credible and local scholastic press association as well as regional and national groups like the Journalism Education Association. These organizations are made up of educators, too, and should gain their respect as such. Similarly,

help get them acquainted with college journalism educators in your area. Their expertise cannot hurt your cause, and may help at a time of crisis.

Form a partnership with the best professional you can at a local newspaper. Cultivate a relationship between the administration and that journalist with regular meetings or bagged lunches. A professional journalist can be a good reality check for both sides; he or she may head off some disagreements before they arise, ideally helping with strategies toward better journalism.

Your students

So, what can students do to make sure their work is stellar, and adheres to professional standards?

Adopt the professional standards of journalism – from ethics policies to policies on the use of confidential sources. The Society of Professional Journalists is a great resource

When it comes to being a journalist, and getting your work taken seriously, remember to No. 1: Be a professional. And, No. 2: The stories come next.

When dealing with sensitive topics – everything from teen suicide to teen pregnancy – remember to discuss the topics as a group. How do your fellow reporters see the story? What's the best way to tell the story? How should the story be focused? Researched and supported?

Sensitive topics should be handled with care, meaning you should discuss the potential outcomes, such as audience reaction to the story and your source's reaction to the story (the story's angle should never be a surprise to your source).

It's important to find sources willing to talk to you for your topic. Is this subject willing to go on record with you? Is this subject willing to have their name used?

Discuss the potential impact on your source if a full name is used when writing about a sensitive topic – good journalism doesn't shy away from using full names of sources, it does shy away from anonymous sources, which, ultimately, cast doubt on the entire report.

Why? The reporter could have made up the information. Or, the reader may not see the subject as a real person.

But there's also the issue of credibility. Credibility is key in making your publication one that will get recognized. You'll produce better stories, and gain more readers when they see your publication as one they can trust. As such, you must guard against sources that may use anonymity as a way to further a personal agenda, or flat out lie. Do your reporting! If you grant confidentiality to a source, do it for the right reasons. (For example, the source may face retaliation when the truth is reported. Again, just make sure what you are reporting is accurate.)

Remember, good journalism is not just about observing. Look at the big picture. Always ask, "What is it I'm observing?" And get sources to back it up. For example, is the issue a larger one (teen pregnancy on the rise) or do you just happen to have two pregnant girls in your homeroom?

Always remember, quality work is your best defense.

But don't forget, covering a variety of topics in your publication – not just the sensitive ones – is important. You may want to include an editor's note to run alongside sensitive stories that the topic may not be suitable to some audiences, or tastes. (Also include such a warning in the policy for your publication and staff manual.) Your policy should unite your readers on serious topics and call for a response from the student body – ensuring education is taking place.

Below you'll find some examples of sensitive topics, suggested sources and suggested ways to handle each. Localizing the topics is essential.

Teen pregnancy

The mother of all controversial teen stories, teen pregnancy, is sure to be one your publication will embark on.

Here are some suggestions on where to start:

• Talk to your school nurse. Ask what kind of records the nurse's office keeps. They may actually track the number of pregnancies. And while you could not get the names of the pregnant teens in your

school (protected by privacy laws), you could get the numbers. (Any record produced by a public employee is a public record, even e-mail!) You also can ask the school nurse if there has been a rise in the number of teen pregnancies. And discuss with the nurse their thoughts on the subject.

- Contact your local health department, which keeps track of local births, and the ages of mothers. Get numbers for at least five years, so you'll have something to compare. Is there a rise or decline in the number of teen pregnancies over the past five years?
- Talk to your principal and teachers (particularly health teachers) about their thoughts. Are there any plans in the works to curb teen pregnancy? What kind of health curriculum is taught in your school? Is it an abstinence-only curriculum?
- Talk to students. What are their thoughts? Are they pregnant, or have a friend who is? Find pregnant teens and interview them. Why do they get pregnant? Also don't forget to talk to teen fathers. (An important angle often overlooked.)

Depending on what you discover during the reporting process, you could have a story (or several) on the rise in pregnant teens in your school, including thoughts from school officials, students and teachers on why. Your story should include some pregnant teens and fathers. Other stories could discuss the impact of the health curriculum in your school, and information on where to go if you are pregnant and scared, or means of pregnancy prevention.

Teen suicide

Another sensitive topic, teen suicide is an all too real in many schools. Teen suicide stories shouldn't be taken lightly. If you find that a student has attempted suicide in your school, you should talk to the student and his or her family. Would they be interested in being interviewed for a story?

The tone of this type of story always should be one of prevention. In it, you should explain the warning signs of teen suicide, and where to go and call for help.

- Talk to students at your school about teen suicide, and get their feelings on it. Is it something teens think about a lot?
- Talk to your guidance counselors. What advice do they offer?
- There are lots of Web sites on the Internet with helpful information regarding teen suicide prevention. Simply perform a Google search, and go from there.

Drugs

Another very sensitive topic, and one that will be difficult to get teens to go on the record, given the matter of legality. If you know the teens aren't lying or exaggerating the truth, a story about teen drug use would be one your publication could use first names only. Or, you may use a completely different name. Whatever you choose, make sure you include an editor's note with the story explaining your rationale. This is a matter of credibility. But remember: This topic may invite questions from your administration if it's intent on detecting drugs in the school, or even police, if they believe you know the details of a crime. You will want to consider these things carefully before starting such a story.

- Along with talking to students about drug use, other sources include police and court records. Are teens getting charged with illegal drug use, and, if so, what drug? Are there any patterns? Your students may be able to use public records (which means teaching them how and why to use them).

- When do teens begin using drugs and alcohol? What credible sources are available for this information?

- Talk to groups, which conduct surveys nationally, such as the PRIDE Surveys, which can give you data on what type of drugs students are using, and when they begin use. Your school may participate in the PRIDE surveys, if so you'll have even more rich data available to you. Get started at pridesurveys.com.

Stories could range from a new drug becoming popular among teens in your area, to drug use declining, to students beginning to experiment with drugs, such as alcohol, at a younger age.

Divorce

Divorce appears to be more common these days. But is it? A good source of information for your area is the U.S. Census. You can find information from your area quickly by visiting census.gov. Use the FactFinder tool to pinpoint your area, and the specific stats you are searching for. Look under "Social Characteristics." There, you'll find specific data about divorce.

- What do the numbers look like? (Compare them with census numbers for previous years.)

• Talk to students. Are they products of divorced homes, and how has the divorce affected them? Did it occur when they were very young?

• Talk to guidance counselors. What are some ways to deal with divorce?

A second story might focus on the effects of divorce. Are children from divorced homes more likely to get into trouble or act out? What about school performance? Stories like this demand fairness and the attempt to interview all relevant points of view and sides.

Molestation and date rape

Two touchy subjects. But two that students should be aware of, and know, if they are a victim, where to go to get help. Again, another story where you may want to change the name of your source to protect his or her identity, or use only first names. In some cases, the source may want to go on record with you, to give others hope. And, as with stories on drugs, prepare for a visit from the administration or police. It is also essential to check the credibility of the charges and the person making them. Just because someone said something happened does not necessarily make it so.

Stories could range from a student overcoming molestation as a child, or even into the teen years, and a student dealing with date rape.

• Include means of prevention, and signs, such as what to look for. How can you help, and where to get help, also is important.

• Check out sources, such as kidshealth.org for information on date rape, and the Child Molestation Research & Prevention Institute at childmolestationprevention.org.

A final word

When full-tilt combat over student publication is waged, you'll have few options. The principal has already quashed your students' work, and everybody is angry. The Student Press Law Center may well be helping you find legal assistance and the board of education is turning its attention to whether to retain you for another year in the adviser's role. This is not the point to consider what you should have done. Being proactive is the best protection.

Sometimes, battle is inevitable. Sometimes administrators can be downright unreasonable. But sometimes, advisers are not as well

trained as they should be or are distracted by other things. Sometimes, students are too inexperienced to do the stories they want to, or – let's admit it – too lazy or interested in more frivolous pursuits.

The best way to avoid conflict and still produce a quality paper and the quality education that attends it is to prepare. It would be well to keep in mind the words of Franklin McCallie, former principal of Kirkwood, Mo. High School, who employed a free expression format to run his school.

"Everybody learns from journalism – the kids, the teachers, the administration, the principals. You just need to be on the same page."

If that's the spirit, from beginning to end, everyone will be a whole lot smarter for it, and smile more, too.
By Melissa Griffy and Rick Senften for advising course in Kent State University's graduate program

Resources
• Los Angeles Times Ethics Guidelines
http://www.poynter.org/uncategorized/71861/los-angeles-times-ethics-guidelines/
• Revealing major issues with youth sports
http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/als-morning-meeting/105576/columbus-dispatch-series-reveals-major-issues-with-youth-sports/
• What to expect from the press
http://www.concernedjournalists.org/tools/principles/rights
• Standards for education reporters
http://www.concernedjournalists.org/standards-education-reporters
• Thinking clearly: Case studies
http://www.concernedjournalists.org/thinking-clearly-case-studies
• If knowing you might be wrong is wrong, I don't want to be right
http://www.concernedjournalists.org/if-knowing-you-might-be-wrong-wrong-i-don-t-want-be-right
• Don't know much about history and why that matters
http://www.concernedjournalists.org/don-t-know-much-about-history
• Yikes! The sky is falling and we're all going to die
http://www.concernedjournalists.org/sky-falling-and-were-all-going-die