



*Sisley v. Seattle School District (2011)*

The March 2009 edition of “The Roosevelt News,” the student paper for Roosevelt High School in Seattle, included an article on a potential project that would tear down rental homes near the school and replace them with a tall building. “Sisley Slums Cause Controversy” included this sentence: “In fifteen years these [Sisley] brothers have acquired 48 housing and building maintenance code violations, and have also been accused of racist renting policies.”

Hugh Sisley sued the Seattle School District Number One for defamation, that is, making false, derogatory claims. He objected to one clause in the article, the clause that read “and have also been accused of racist renting policies.”

The Washington state superior court judge ruled against Sisley and in favor of the school district, writing “a public school student is not an agent or employee of the school district.” In addition, “the public school district is a governmental entity constitutionally prohibited from censoring or otherwise curtailing a student’s First Amendment right to free speech unless there is evidence censorship is necessary to prevent disruption of the school environment. No such evidence exists.” A later appeals court decision in *Sisley* doesn’t include this same analysis, but ruled in favor of the students.

In addition, the judge found no defamation had occurred, since Sisley could not prove the statement was false or that his reputation was damaged.

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