



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
Friday, Feb. 19th, 2021

Contact:

Hadar Harris, Executive Director  
Student Press Law Center  
(202) 549-6316 / [hharris@splc.org](mailto:hharris@splc.org)

## **Censorship of Student Journalists Persists Despite their Essential Role Reporting on COVID, Protests, Racial Justice and Elections, New White Paper Finds**

### ***Student Journalists Celebrate 3rd Annual Student Press Freedom Day on Feb. 26***

Washington, D.C. — In anticipation of the 3rd annual [Student Press Freedom Day](#) on **Friday, Feb. 26th**, the Student Press Law Center released a white paper today detailing a continuing pattern of censorship of student journalists by school officials across the country. [Student Journalists in 2020: Journalism Against the Odds](#) notes that, despite incredible challenges students faced, they produced top-quality reporting on the most important safety, health and political issues of our day.

Examples detailed in the white paper include:

- A high school student editor in Oklahoma was censored as they tried to publish an article about teachers resigning due to safety concerns over COVID-19.
- After a high school yearbook in Texas was printed and distribution was underway, the superintendent told the adviser that they had to halt distribution because a spread on the Black Lives Matter movement “would not sit well” in their conservative community.
- A principal at a New York public high school prevented a student journalist from publishing an op-ed about concerns regarding inadequate instructional time due to distance learning until another article was published alongside which supported the school’s distance learning program.
- Student journalists in Virginia are exploring legal action after their university withheld important health and safety data, wrongfully citing FERPA and HIPAA concerns.

“Student journalists, like professional journalists, provide an essential, constitutionally-protected service to their communities and should be recognized and fully supported for the service they provide in gathering and delivering vital information on issues of concern to the public,” said Hadar Harris, executive director of the Student Press Law Center. “The troubling trends we observed over the past year reinforce the need to ensure legal protections for student journalists in all 50 states.”

The theme for Student Press Freedom Day 2021 is [Journalism Against the Odds](#), in acknowledgment of the important news coverage student journalists have produced, despite being faced with incredible challenges. In addition to outright censorship, student journalists worked against odds that included prior review, lack of access to critical data, suppression of or discipline for unflattering or controversial photos or other news coverage, assault and harassment during public gatherings, budget cuts, and an abrupt shift to an all-virtual newsroom and all-online business model. Furthermore, they faced the continuing scourge of a legal system that, following the 1988 U.S. Supreme Court decision [Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier](#), has created an exemption for student free speech rights as it relates to student journalists, allowing overzealous school administrators to assert their power to censor broadly.

“As the only reporters with a front row seat to the challenge of safe schooling in 2020, student journalists like me had a unique perspective on the experience of the nearly 73 million students who were forced to move suddenly to remote learning in spring 2020 and the impact this had on our families and communities,” said Neha Madhira, sophomore at the University of Texas, Austin and reporter at the *Daily Texan*. “Beyond our COVID-19 reporting, we have helped curate an important discussion about racial justice and systemic racism on our campuses and communities, and we took physical risks to cover protests in our communities, often being targeted by law enforcement because of our role as journalists. We student journalists must be allowed to do our jobs without undue interference.”

As part of Student Press Freedom Day, SPLC has curated [21 examples of impactful, important student journalism](#), focused on reporting on the impact of COVID-19, reckoning with racial justice, overcoming censorship and more. The stories represent work by both high school and college journalists with diverse backgrounds and from geographically diverse schools. These stories represent some of the very best in student journalism.

A critical part of Student Press Freedom Day is students sharing their stories with mainstream media outlets, lawmakers, and their peers about the incredible odds they have faced in the past year to carry out their work. More than 100 student journalists took part this month in an **op-ed writing “boot camp” with veteran CNN & New York Times Journalist Steven A. Holmes** about how to craft and place an op-ed, and nearly half of the participants are working with a professional coach to support their efforts.

In addition, with legislative sessions underway, students are advocating with [New Voices chapters](#) in their states and testifying before education and judiciary committees for proposed **changes to state law that will protect student press freedom**. They are creating and sharing

video testimonials on social media about the challenges they face as student journalists and spreading the word using the hashtag **#StudentPressFreedom**. They are participating in a **student-moderated town hall forum** about how to strengthen student press freedom moving forward. They are hosting **group screenings and discussions of [Raise Your Voice](#)**, a documentary about how the student journalists at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL navigated their school mass shooting as both survivors and journalists.

Student Press Freedom Day is co-sponsored by more than 15 organizations, including the Journalism Education Association, the College Media Association, The Associated Collegiate Press, the National Scholastic Press Association, the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, and more.

“In the past year, readership of student newspapers significantly increased in many places, underscoring the important role student media plays in the community in times of crisis and moments of historic significance,” said Hadar Harris. “As student press freedom faced unparalleled challenges in 2020, the movement to support it continues to grow.”

###

### **About Student Press Freedom Day**

The Student Press Law Center launched Student Press Freedom Day in 2019 to raise awareness of the vital work and impact of student journalists, highlight the censorship and prior review challenges student journalists face, and underscore the importance of journalism education. It is a national day of action which activates and empowers student journalists to assert their right to student press freedom.

Visit the Student Press Freedom Day website at [www.studentpressfreedom.org](http://www.studentpressfreedom.org)

### **About the Student Press Law Center**

The Student Press Law Center ([SPLC.org](http://SPLC.org), [@splc](https://twitter.com/splc)) is an independent, nonpartisan 501(c)(3) nonprofit working at the intersection of law, journalism and education to support, promote and defend the rights of student journalists and their advisers at the high school and college levels. SPLC has the nation’s only free legal hotline for student journalists. Based in Washington, D.C., the Student Press Law Center provides information, training and legal assistance at no charge to student journalists and the educators who work with them