

Testimony from Jenna Majeski, Woodstock, on S18
April 27, 2017

Good morning everyone, my name is Jenna Majeski and I am a senior at Woodstock Union High School where I have been the school publication's editor for the past two years and I have written articles for the past three. Since becoming the editor, I have been working alongside our Journalism advisor who is also a reporter for The Vermont Standard, Michelle Fountain, to develop a proposal to become a public forum. In addition, we worked as a class to create a list of ethical guidelines that would dictate how we would cover difficult issues and how we could be a responsible publication without administrative censorship. Last year we submitted our proposal to the school board, which, in 2006, voted that the school was not a public forum. No progress was made on our request, therefore, I believe that Senate Bill 18 is very important for school publications in developing honesty, maturity, and responsibility.

At Woodstock, our administration hasn't really taken advantage of their right to censor, but then again, our publication staff hasn't felt totally comfortable pursuing controversial topics. This year I faced my first true controversial issue to cover: a nude photo sharing ring happening at Woodstock. From the start I knew this would be complicated, but after talking to Ms. Fountain, I got started by collecting hard facts to make sure the article had no issues. Ms. Fountain went to our principal to get the "okay" to cover the topic, and I continued with his approval. Although almost immediately our school dean called Ms. Fountain with concerns about the article and if it should be written for the school paper. I felt that although I knew how to cover the issue and I knew, as a trained journalist, what information I could include or not include, that the school didn't trust me to cover this delicate issue. At WUHS we receive hours of teaching in our journalism class about both style and ethics, and articles go through copious levels of editing before even being published, so I felt that I was more than qualified to be covering this issue but I didn't feel that I had the support I needed from administration to publish despite the fact that our local paper had covered the topic and, after a full investigation, our school determined to deal with part of this issue through more education with a parent forum and assembly this week about sexting.

Without feeling comfortable publishing all articles, we are restricting students' rights to know what is going on in their school and community.

School journalism is real, it is not a simulation, and it needs to be treated as such. Currently, the journalism world is facing many allegations about “fake news” and journalists as a whole aren’t being trusted as they should be. What kind of habits are we instilling in the country’s future journalists if they are being censored and expected to write only what certain people want to hear, rather than what they should be able to hear-the real facts?

Working with our advisor and our own ethical code, we know how to cover delicate issues and what we can and cannot say. Our hands, or presses as it were, should not be tied. Journalists need to be reliable and willing to cover what needs to be covered. The First Amendment guarantees that the media isn’t censored beyond school except through the truth and their own ethical code, and it’s important that student and thus future journalists are prepared for this kind of freedom.