

My name is Chris Evans. I advise student media at the University of Vermont. I'm here today to tell you why I and others support this bill, which is modeled on similar laws around the country intended to protect students' First Amendment rights.

New Voices Vermont is a student-powered, grassroots movement to give young people the legally protected right to gather information and share ideas about issues of public concern.

We work with advocates in law, education, journalism and civics to make schools and colleges more welcoming places for student voices. We draw inspiration from a similar law in North Dakota, which passed unanimously in 2015. Today, nearly 20 states are working to pass a law just like this one.

We work closely with the Student Press Law Center, a nonprofit that advocates for student journalists. The language in our bill represents standards supported by a consensus of every journalism education authority in America, including the American Society of News Editors, whose statement of support I have provided you today. Here in Vermont, the bill has the support of educators, journalists and students from one end of the state to the other. Supporters include leaders of the Vermont Press Association, the Vermont Journalism Education Association, the New England First Amendment Coalition, the University of Vermont Student Government Association and others.

So: Why do we need the law? A succession of Supreme Court cases has left students and educators with no clear, legal guidance about how to handle potentially concerning issues in student journalism, and student articles often have less protection than the writing on a student's t-shirt. The New Voices law would give a student's news article exactly the same protection as that t-shirt, but no more. It would not give students unlimited freedom. High school officials could and should still stop students who go too far. Students would not be permitted to commit libel, or invade another person's privacy or publish obscenity. High school officials could stop all of these and anything else that creates what the landmark Supreme Court decision of *Tinker vs. Des Moines* identified as a "clear and present danger" of a "material and substantial disruption" to the school.

Relying on this precise language—tested over decades—is important. Without clear guidelines, both students and educators remain uncertain about what is or isn't permitted. A culture has developed in which students simply don't know what their rights are, so they shy away from addressing issues that they fear an authority figure might disagree with. Not even disapprove of, but disagree with. We believe that any kind of censorship, including this kind of self-censorship, hurts students and society. It teaches our young people that censorship is okay. But we cannot afford to have curiosity and confidence bred out of our students. We cannot afford to stifle today's new voices because they are tomorrow's leaders and citizens.

Today we have three student journalists who will speak of their own experiences and why we need this law.