

Students

Restrictions on Publications; High Schools ¹

[For high school or unit districts only]

Definitions ²

Libel means the willful or negligent publication of provably false and unprivileged statements of fact that do demonstrable harm to a living person's reputation.

Obscene means lewd; impure; indecent; calculated to shock the moral sense of humans by a disregard of chastity or modesty. Objectionable or offensive to accepted standards of decency.

School official means a Building Principal or designee.

School-sponsored media means any material that is prepared, substantially written, published, or broadcast by a student journalist, distributed or generally made available to members of the student body, and prepared under the direction of a student media advisor. It does not include media intended for distribution or transmission solely in the classroom in which the media is produced.

Slander means the speaking of false statements of fact that seriously harm a living person's reputation.

Student journalist means a public high school student who gathers, compiles, writes, edits, photographs, records, or prepares information for dissemination in school-sponsored media.

*Student media adviser*³ means an individual employed, appointed, or designated by the District to supervise or provide instruction relating to school-sponsored media.

School-Sponsored Media

School-sponsored publications, productions, and websites are governed by the Speech Rights of Student Journalists Act and School Board policies, and student journalists are responsible for determining the news, opinion, feature, and advertising content of those publications, productions, and websites. ⁴

Student journalists must: ⁵

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¹ State or federal law controls this policy's content. This policy concerns an area in which the law is unsettled.

² Speech Rights of Student Journalists Act (SRSJA), 105 ILCS 80/5. See also *Black's Law Dictionary*, 11th ed. 2019.

³ *Id.* uses *adviser*, not *advisor*. *Adviser* is used throughout this policy for consistency with the statute.

⁴ *Id.* With some exceptions, the Act effectively restricts school authorities' power to reasonably regulate student expression in high school-sponsored publications for education-related reasons under *Hazelwood Sch. Dist. v. Kuhlmeier*, 484 U.S. 260 (1988). See the last sentence in f/n 6, below.

⁵ Consult the board attorney about text that balances the student journalists' rights to have control of their media publications with the board's interests in (a) ensuring differing opinions are published, (b) the SRSJA, and (c) providing student journalists opportunities to apply the Illinois media literacy curriculum mandates.

1. Make decisions based upon news value and guided by the Code of Ethics provided by the Society of Professional Journalists, National Scholastic Press Association, Journalism Education Association, or other relevant group;
2. Produce media based upon professional standards of accuracy, objectivity, and fairness;
3. Review material to improve sentence structure, grammar, spelling, and punctuation;
4. Check and verify all facts and verify the accuracy of all quotations;
5. In the use of personal opinions, editorial statements, and/or letters to the editor, provide opportunity and space for the expression of differing opinions within the same media to align with the District’s media literacy curriculum ~~mandate in 105 ILCS 5/27-20.08~~; and
6. Include an author’s name with any personal opinions and editorial statements, if appropriate.

Student journalists may not create, produce, or distribute school-sponsored media that: ⁶

1. Is libelous, slanderous, or obscene;
2. Constitutes an unwarranted invasion of privacy;
3. Violates federal or State law, including the Constitutional rights of third parties;⁷ or
4. Incites students to: ⁸

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Number 5 in the list is intended to align with the *media literacy curriculum* mandate for students in grades 9 through 12 and is listed at 105 ILCS 5/27-~~415, renumbered by P.A. 104-391 and scheduled for repeal on 7-1-27,20.08~~ and sample policy 6:60, *Curriculum Content*. [Beginning with the 2027-2028 school year, media literacy instruction is combined with instruction on Internet safety under 105 ILCS 5/27-405\(c\), added by P.A. 104-391.](#) *Media literacy* means the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and communicate using a variety of objective forms, including, but not limited to, print, visual, audio, interactive, and digital texts. *Id.* Media literacy instruction must include a component on social responsibility and civics that includes “[s]uggesting a plan of action in the class, school, or community to engage others in a respectful, thoughtful, and inclusive dialogue over a specific issue using facts and reason.” Providing opportunity and space for expression of differing opinions in media aligns with and promotes this inclusive dialog.

For boards that provide student journalists more flexibility, make the following three edits: (1) replace “must” with: “shall strive to.” (2) amend number 5 to read: “In the use of personal opinions, editorial statements, and/or letters to the editor, determine the need to provide opportunity and space for the expression of differing opinions within the same media to align with the District’s media literacy curriculum ~~mandate in in 105 ILCS 5/27-20.08~~”, and (3) delete number 6.

⁶ 105 ILCS 80/15. A school board may retain control of material in student publications that falls within the listed exceptions. Consult the board attorney about how much control of high school student publications school officials may retain in the context of the Speech Rights of Student Journalists Act.

⁷ 105 ILCS 80/15.

Delete “, including Constitutional rights of third parties” if the board wants only the word-for-word statutory language in its policy. Because the Constitutional rights of third parties are common controversies within the context of student-sponsored publications, the purpose of this additional text is to underscore that Constitutional rights of third parties are included under the exception of State and federal law.

While 105 ILCS 80/20 limits liability of school districts for a student journalist’s expression, except in cases of willful or wanton misconduct, some attorneys believe it may still be possible that a third party may seek to hold the district responsible for the student journalists’ acts. See *Yeo v. Town of Lexington*, 131 F.3d 241 (1st Cir. 1997), *cert. denied* (1998).

⁸ 105 ILCS 80/15 broadly allows school boards to limit speech that would incite violation of any policy. This policy language follows the statute. Policies most often needing assessment are those that involve a district’s educational mission and philosophy and social appropriateness language for student body’s age(s)/maturity. School officials must be careful to understand that that law is written that student journalists using media to *incite* other students to act a certain way is the exception. Additional text may be added to (1) underscore that 105 ILCS 80/15 does not authorize or protect expression that *incites* students to violate board policies, and (2) reminds students and the community that school officials have many legal obligations to implement and enforce specific board policies and ensure school environments are safe and conducive to learning.

While 105 ILCS 80/20 limits liability of school districts for a student journalist’s expression, except in cases of willful or wanton misconduct, discuss with the board attorney how to balance the rights of student journalists under this law and the other policy implementation duties that face school officials with board policies and laws.

For boards that want to provide additional text to the word-for-word statutory language in their policies, add to item 4.b:

- a. Commit an unlawful act;
- b. Violate any of the District's policies; or
- c. Materially and substantially disrupt the orderly operation of the school.

The District will not engage in prior restraint of material prepared by student journalists for school-sponsored media, unless the material fits into one of the four prohibited categories listed above, in which case the Superintendent or designee and/or student media adviser may review, edit, and delete such media material before publication or distribution of the media. ⁹

No expression made by students in the exercise of freedom of speech or freedom of the press under this policy shall be deemed to be an expression of the District or an expression of Board policy. ¹⁰

Non-School Sponsored Publications Accessed or Distributed On Campus ¹¹

For purposes of this section and the following section, a *publication* includes, without limitation: (1) written or electronic print material, (2) audio-visual material on any medium including electromagnetic media (e.g., images, digital files, flash memory, etc.), or combinations of these whether off-line (e.g., a printed book, digital files, etc.) or online (e.g., any website, social networking site, database for information retrieval, etc.), or (3) information or material on electronic devices (e.g., text or voice messages delivered by cell phones, tablets, and other hand-held devices). ¹²

Creating, distributing, and/or accessing non-school sponsored publications shall occur at a time and place and in a manner that will not cause disruption, be coercive, or result in the perception that the distribution or the publication is endorsed by the District.

Students are prohibited from creating, distributing, and/or accessing at school any publication that:

1. Will cause a material and substantial disruption of the proper and orderly operation and discipline of the school or school activities; ¹³

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, including but not limited to (1) its educational mission in Board policies 1:30, *School District Philosophy* and 6:10, *Educational Philosophy and Objectives*, and (2) speech that is socially inappropriate or inappropriate due to the maturity of the students pursuant to Board policies 6:65, *Student Social and Emotional Development* and 7:180 *Prevention of and Response to Bullying, Intimidation, and Harassment*.

⁹ 105 ILCS 80/10 requires school officials to show justification without undue delay before limiting student expression. For boards that want the student media advisor to provide student journalists with written justification prior to limiting materials, insert the following sentence to end the paragraph:

In such cases, the student media adviser will promptly provide the student journalist with a written justification prior to limiting the material.

¹⁰ 105 ILCS 80/20.

¹¹ Non-school sponsored publications, like underground newspapers, cannot be subject to the same degree of regulation by school authorities as school-sponsored publications. Absent a showing of material and substantial interference with the requirements of good discipline, students retain their First Amendment free speech rights. The federal circuits disagree on whether school authorities may require prior approval before a student is allowed to distribute non-school-sponsored publications. The Seventh Circuit, which covers Illinois, refused to approve prior approval regulations. *Fujishima v. Bd. of Ed.*, 460 F.2d 1355 (7th Cir. 1972), but see *Baughman v. Freienmuth*, 478 F.2d 1345 (4th Cir. 1973). Non-school sponsored web-sites should be regulated in the same manner as non-school sponsored publications.

A school policy prohibiting junior high students from distributing written material at school that is prepared by non-students was upheld in *Hedges v. Wauconda Cmty. Unit Sch. Dist. No. 118*, 9 F.3d 1295 (7th Cir. 1993).

¹² The definition of *publication* is optional and may be amended. This sample definition uses broad and generally understood terms to keep the policy current with rapid technology changes.

¹³ For example, a school district may discipline a student for writing an underground newspaper, and distributing it at school, that contained an article on how to hack into the school's computer. School authorities could reasonably believe the article would be disruptive. *Boucher v. Sch. Bd. of the Sch. Dist. of Greenfield*, 134 F.3d 821 (7th Cir. 1998).

2. Violates the rights of others, including but not limited to material that is libelous, slanderous or obscene, invades the privacy of others, or infringes on a copyright; ¹⁴
3. Is socially inappropriate or inappropriate due to maturity level of the students, including but not limited to material that is obscene, pornographic, or pervasively lewd and vulgar, contains indecent and vulgar language, or *sexting* as defined by Board policy 7:190, *Student Behavior*, and/or Student Handbooks;
4. Is reasonably viewed as promoting illegal drug use; ¹⁵
5. Is distributed in kindergarten through eighth grade and is primarily prepared by non-students, unless it is being used for school purposes. However, material from outside sources or the citation to such sources may be allowed, as long as the material to be distributed or accessed is primarily prepared by students; ¹⁶ or
6. Encourages or incites students to violate any Board policies.

Accessing or distributing *on-campus* includes accessing or distributing on school property or at school-related activities. A student engages in gross disobedience and misconduct and may be disciplined for: (1) accessing or distributing forbidden material, or (2) for writing, creating, or publishing such material intending for it to be accessed or distributed at school. ¹⁷

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¹⁴ School officials may not regulate student speech based upon their fear or apprehension of disturbance. Many decisions address the tension between students' right to free speech and restrictions of it on campus. See, for example:

Brandt v. Bd. of Educ. of City of Chicago, 480 F.3d 460 (7th Cir. 2007), *cert. denied* (2007) (school did not violate students' First Amendment rights when it disciplined students for wearing T-shirts with a "talentless infantile drawing" that school officials reasonably found to undermine the educational atmosphere).

Nuxoll v. Indian Prairie Sch. Dist. #204, 523 F.3d 668 (7th Cir. 2008) (holding that the student was likely to succeed on merits of his claim that the school would violate his speech rights by preventing him from wearing T-shirt with slogan "Be Happy, Not Gay"). But see L.M. v. Town of Middleborough, Massachusetts, 103 F.4th 854 (1st Cir. 2024) (holding a school could prohibit a student from wearing a shirt which read "There Are Only Two Genders" because the message directly attacked the personal characteristics of transgender and nonconforming students, which could cause lower grades and increased absences).

J.C. v. Beverly Hills Unified Sch. Dist., 711 F.Supp.2d 1094 593 F.3d 249 (C.D.Cal3rd Cir. 2010) (discussed the "rights of others to be secure and let alone" argument from Tinker v. Des Moines Indep. Cmty. Sch. Dist., 393 U.S. 503 (1969), but found that the school district violated a student's First Amendment rights for disciplining her when she posted a video clip on a website).

B.H. v. Easton Area Sch. Dist., 725 F.3d 293 (3rd Cir 2013), *cert. denied* (2014) (school violated students' free speech rights by banning the wearing of cancer awareness bracelets containing the caption *I♥boobies*).

¹⁵ Morse v. Frederick, 551 U.S. 393 (2007).

¹⁶ Optional. The rationale for this section is that prior to high school, students have not developed sufficient experience and education in critical review of external resource materials. Accordingly, in order to accomplish the district's educational mission, yet allow students the opportunity to communicate with their fellow students, widespread student distribution of written material in elementary and middle school may be limited to material primarily prepared by the students themselves. Hedges v. Wauconda Cmty. Unit Sch. Dist. No. 118, 9 F.3rd 1295 (7th Cir. 1993); Leal v. Everett Pub. Schs., 88 F.Supp.3d 1220 (W.D.Wa. 2015).

¹⁷ See f/n 13, above.

Non-School Sponsored Publications Accessed or Distributed Off-Campus ¹⁸

A student engages in gross disobedience and misconduct and may be disciplined for creating and/or distributing a publication that: (1) causes a substantial disruption or a foreseeable risk of a substantial disruption to school operations, or (2) interferes with the rights of other students or staff members.

Bullying and Cyberbullying ¹⁹

The Superintendent or designee shall treat behavior that is *bullying* and/or *cyberbullying* according to Board policy 7:180, *Prevention of and Response to Bullying, Intimidation, and Harassment*, in addition to any response required by this policy.

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¹⁸ Optional. School officials must proceed carefully before disciplining a student for out-of-school conduct. A school's authority over off-campus expression is much more limited than expression on school grounds. Many decisions address the tension between public schools' authority to discipline students for off-campus speech and students' right to free speech. However, school officials may generally: (1) remove a student from extracurricular activities when the conduct code for participation requires students to conduct themselves at all times as good citizens and exemplars of the school (see sample policy 7:240, *Conduct Code for Participants in Extracurricular Activities*); and (2) suspend or expel a student from school attendance when the student's expression causes substantial disruption to school operations, as provided in this policy (see also sample policy 7:190, *Student Behavior*). For example, see:

Mahanoy Area School Dist. v. B.L., 594 U.S. 180 (2021) (a school could not suspend a student from the cheerleading team for vulgar posts that she made on a social media platform where there was no evidence of substantial disruption of a school activity; schools have more limited authority to punish students for vulgar, off-campus speech, unless there are circumstances involving severe bullying or harassment, threats aimed at teachers or other students, failure to follow rules concerning lessons, writing of papers, use of computers, participation in other online school activities, or breaches of school security devices including school computers).

J.S. v. Blue Mountain Sch. Dist., 650 F.3d 915 (3rd Cir. 2011), combined with Layshock v. Hermitage Sch. Dist., 650 F.3d 205 (3rd Cir. 2011), *cert. denied* (2012) (schools may not punish students for their off-campus indecent and offensive parodies of their principals, absent a showing that the parodies caused, or could cause, substantial disruption in the schools).

Kowalski v. Berkeley Cnty. Sch., 652 F.3d 565 (4th Cir. 2011), *cert. denied* (2012) (upheld a student's suspension for off-campus posts to a social network site that defamed a classmate because it was foreseeable that the expression would reach the school and the student's conduct involved substantial disruption and interference with the work and discipline of the school).

The statutory definition of *bullying* includes *cyberbullying* (105 ILCS 5/22-1107-23-7, [renumbered by P.A. 104-391](#)); these terms are defined in sample policy 7:180, *Prevention of and Response to Bullying, Intimidation, and Harassment*.

Consult the board attorney for guidance concerning off-campus speech. Every situation is fact specific, and the issues require careful evaluation.

¹⁹ 105 ILCS 5/22-1107-23-7, [amended by P.A. 104-338](#), [eff. 7-1-26](#) and [renumbered by P.A. 104-391](#).

LEGAL REF.: 105 ILCS ~~5/22-110-5/27-20.08 and 5/27-23.7, 5/27-405, and 5/27-415~~ (scheduled for repeal on 7-1-27).
105 ILCS 80/, Speech Rights of Student Journalists Act.
Tinker v. Des Moines Indep. Cmty. Sch. Dist., 393 U.S. 503 (1969).
Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier, 484 U.S. 260 (1988).
Morse v. Frederick, 551 U.S. 393 (2007).
Hedges v. Wauconda Cmty. Unit Sch. Dist. No. 118, 9 F.3d 1295 (7th Cir. 1993).

CROSS REF.: 1:30 (School District Philosophy), 6:10 (Educational Philosophy and Objectives), 6:65 (Student Social and Emotional Development), 6:235 (Access to Electronic Networks), 7:180 (Prevention of and Response to Bullying, Intimidation, and Harassment), 7:190 (Student Behavior), 7:310 (Restrictions on Publications; Elementary Schools), 8:25 (Advertising and Distributing Materials in Schools Provided by Non-School Related Entities)

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