

Students

Restrictions on Publications; Elementary Schools¹

[For elementary or unit districts only]

School-Sponsored Publications and Websites

School-sponsored publications, productions, and websites are part of the curriculum and are not a public forum for general student use.² School authorities may edit or delete material that is inconsistent with the District's educational mission.

All school-sponsored communications shall comply with the ethics and rules of responsible journalism. Text that is libelous, obscene, vulgar, lewd, invades the privacy of others, conflicts with the basic educational mission of the school, is socially inappropriate, is inappropriate due to the maturity of the students, or is materially disruptive to the educational process will not be tolerated.

The author's name will accompany personal opinions and editorial statements. An opportunity for the expression of differing opinions from those published/produced will be provided within the same media.

Non-School Sponsored Publications Accessed or Distributed On-Campus³

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).⁴

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 substantial disruption of the proper and orderly operation and discipline of the school or school activities;⁵

¹ State or federal law controls this policy's content. This policy concerns an area in which the law is unsettled. It applies only to elementary or unit districts (both elementary and high school students). Unit districts should adopt this policy and policy 7:315, *Restrictions on Publications; High Schools*. The Speech Rights of Student Journalists Act, 105 ILCS 80/5, applies to high school and unit districts.

² School authorities may reasonably regulate student expression in school-sponsored publications for education-related reasons. *Hazelwood Sch. Dist. v. Kuhlmeier*, 484 U.S. 260 (1988). This policy allows such control by clearly stating that school-sponsored publications are not a "public forum" open for general student use but are, instead, part of the curriculum.

A school board that does not retain control of student publications can anticipate at least two problems: (1) how to keep content consistent with the district's mission, and (2) how to ensure that the Constitutional rights of third parties are not violated by student journalists. Concerning the second problem, 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).

³ 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).

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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, invades the privacy of others, or infringes on a copyright;⁶
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;⁷ or
5. Is distributed in kindergarten through eighth grade and is primarily prepared by non-students, unless it is being used for school purposes. Nothing herein shall be interpreted to prevent the inclusion of material from outside sources or the citation to such sources as long as the material to be distributed or accessed is primarily prepared by students.⁸

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.⁹

⁶ 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, Mass., 103 F.4th 854 (1st Cir. 2024) (holding a school could prohibit a student from wearing a shirt that 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 (C.D.Cal. 2010) (discussed the "rights of others to be secure and let alone" argument from Tinker, 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*).

⁷ Be sure that the board's definitions for sexting in this policy align with other definitions used throughout the board's policy manual. For example, see the discussion within sample administrative procedure 7:190 AP5, *Student Handbook Electronic Devices*. There, sexting encompasses the term indecent visual depiction as defined by 705 ILCS 405/3-40 (Juvenile Court Act purposes), and non-consensual dissemination of private sexual images as defined by 720 ILCS 5/11-23.5 (Criminal Code of 2012 purposes). It defines indecent visual depiction as a depiction or portrayal in any pose, posture, or setting involving a lewd exhibition of the buttocks, or if such person is a female, a fully or partially developed breast of the person. However, a district may create or have another definition of sexting that may or may not encompass these statutory terms and definitions.

⁸ Morse v. Frederick, 551 U.S. 393 (2007).

⁹ 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.3d 1295 (7th Cir. 1993); Leal v. Everett Public Schs., 88 F.Supp.3d 1220 (W.D.Wa. 2015).

¹⁰ 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 School Dist. of Greenfield, 134 F.3d 821 (7th Cir. 1998). See f/n 5, above.

Non-School Sponsored Publications Accessed or Distributed Off-Campus ¹⁰

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 ¹¹

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.

LEGAL REF.: 105 ILCS 5/27-23.7.
Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier, 484 U.S. 260 (1988).
Tinker v. Des Moines Indep. Cmty. Sch. Dist., 393 U.S. 503 (1969).
Hedges v. Wauconda Cmty. Unit Sch. Dist. No. 118, 9 F.3d 1295 (7th Cir. 1993).

CROSS REF.: 6:235 (Access to Electronic Networks), 7:180 (Prevention of and Response to Bullying, Intimidation, and Harassment), 7:190 (Student Behavior), 7:315 (Restrictions on Publications; High Schools), 8:25 (Advertising and Distributing Materials in Schools Provided by Non-School Related Entities)

¹¹ 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 for failure to follow an extracurricular conduct code (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 also 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 (3d 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 5/27-23.7); 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.

¹² 105 ILCS 5/27-23.7.