



Students in Pittsburg, Kansas, landed a scoop that made the principal resign.

PROTECTING THE RIGHT TO WRITE

More states are acting to shield school newspapers from censorship. What's fueling the movement? BY CHRISANNE GRISÉ

The student journalists at Pittsburg High School in Pittsburg, Kansas, were suspicious. They had set out to profile a recently hired principal, Amy Robertson, for the school paper. But when they dug into her background, things didn't add up. Even details like where she earned her degrees seemed questionable.

The reporters met with Superintendent Destry Brown about their concerns. He was supportive. So on a Friday night in March 2017, the paper published a story calling attention to the discrepancies. By Tuesday, Robertson had resigned “in the best interest of the district.”

Many praised the students. “I believe strongly in our kids questioning things and not believing things just because an adult told them,” Brown says.

The shocking report might never have made it to print if it weren't for the Kansas Student Publications Act. The law grants student journalists independent control over their editorial content. It even lets students publish things that paint an unflattering picture of a school. Similar laws now exist in 13 other states. (*see map, facing page*).

In most areas of the country, though, the story might not have seen the light of day. But that could change. This year, 11 more states are debating or have already debated so-called New Voices laws. New York and Missouri are two of them. If these laws get passed, they would guard school news publications against censorship.

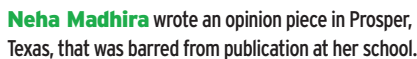
“This movement has been growing,” says Hadar Harris, executive director at the Student Press Law Center, “because

of committed teachers and students who recognize the need to protect student journalists.”

The Supreme Court

The First Amendment guarantees freedom of the press. But with school publications, it's more complicated.

In 1969, the *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* case reached the Supreme Court. The Court ruled that students have the right to express opinions as long as they don't disturb the learning environment. But things changed in 1988, with the *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier* case. A school district in Missouri had removed a spread on divorce and teenage pregnancy from a student newspaper. The Court decided that the school district had acted lawfully. Student newspapers



“Since the *Hazelwood* decision was handed down, student journalists have had lesser protections under the First Amendment than other high school students do,” Harris says.

"It's not saying you can publish whatever you want to publish—there has to be good judgment used," Harris says.

'NEW VOICES' LAWS

Nearly half the states have passed or recently introduced anti-censorship legislation for school newspapers

Legend:

- HAS A NEW VOICES LAW
- NEW VOICES BILL INTRODUCED IN 2019
- NEW VOICES BILL INTRODUCED IN 2019

Alaska and Hawaii are not drawn to scale or placed in their proper geographic positions.

**Arkansas strengthened its existing law this year.*

With reporting by Christopher Mele of The Times.