

Policy-oriented student journalists see 'stories that need to be told'

By Jason Franchuk
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

The final issue of Niskayuna High Schools' magazine, *The Warrior*, for the 2017-18 school year featured a range of topics you probably recall from your own high school days: Features on year-ending events ... a curriculum story comparing the long-term merits of statistics and calculus ... op-eds grousing about English classes. But the student journalists also covered bigger stories that connect to national issues.

"Last year, we published articles on sexual harassment, our school's football players taking a knee and a walkout arranged in conjunction with the national remembrance of Parkland High School shootings," Niskayuna newspaper adviser James Edgar told *On Board*. "I enjoy seeing students rise to the challenge of different subjects. It's a powerful learning experience about having an audience."

Katrina Paron, who runs the New York City High School Journalism Collaborative, said that student journalism has become more outwardly focused than ever before.

"Kids are very interested in their environment these days," Paron said. "And many of these conversations and stories that are being produced are quite bright and alive."

In 2013, *The New York Times* reported that only 1 in 8 of New York's public schools had a student newspaper and that many were being published infrequently. But Paron sees a resurgence of students who are passionate about journalism.

One factor has been information-age media tools, like the versatile iPhone, which provides new ways to reach an audience. Also, there is a seemingly endless array of hot-button issues to write or broadcast about.

Manoli Figetakis, a senior at the 4,500-student Francis Lewis High School in Queens, says he has "fallen in love" with journalism for a chance to get behind the scenes, then out front to tell the story. His school's hot topic is illegal immigration, and the anxiety felt by many undocumented students.

"There are stories that need to be told," Figetakis said.

In March, Figetakis' nose for news took him to Washington D.C. for the "March for Our Lives" protest. He wrote a short story and produced a 1-minute video off his phone documenting involvement of students from his school in the rally.

The coverage is on FLHSNews.com, a professional-looking website built by journalism adviser Jackie Linge.

"It's awesome to see them engaged," said Linge. "They start to realize the power of it, too. There are a lot of issues out there for students to discuss right now, from immigration to #MeToo. Their minds are going. And they have so much to say."

Journalism can be a great way



Above, student journalist Manoli Figetakis interviews fellow student Aayushi Patel at Francis Lewis High School in Queens. Below, Figetakis covers an immigration protest. Photos courtesy of Manoli Figetakis



to develop a sense of judgment and responsibility, said Sarah Nichols, president of the Journalism Education Association. The nonprofit association provides professional development to student journalists and their advisers.

While it can be fun to have one's words broadcasted, printed or posted, "with that comes so much responsibility in terms of getting it right and sharing it carefully and wisely and using the tools for good rather than being wooed by their

capability," Nichols said.

Administrators can be protective of the school's image. They have been known to cajole students or lean on advisers. In some cases, student journalists have challenged actions they

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Remember January 2017? Political tensions were running high in the wake of President Donald Trump's surprise electoral victory.

In the Corning-Painted Post School District, several teachers had organized a walk from the high school to the local office of U.S. Rep. Tom Reed II, a Republican who formerly served as Corning's mayor. They wanted to protest the pending appointment of Betsy DeVos as U.S. education secretary.

Local Democratic activists also showed up to protest Trump. To the dismay of school district officials, local media covered the teachers' march and the Democratic protest as one event.

"I remember it well," Corning-Painted Post High School Superintendent Michael Ginalski said. "Tensions were pretty high."

On Facebook and other social media, the yearbook staff at Corning-Painted Post High School covered the protest. It came amid rumors that students in the high school were being told to remove Make America Great Again hats. There was also confusion on whether students could wear political shirts (they can).

From 7 to 10 p.m., Ginalski fielded calls from about 30 parents, many who were incensed over a photo of a teacher creating an anti-DeVos poster in the high school. They were concerned that taxpayer dollars were being used to promote a particular political party. Some told him they were going to organize a rally at the school the next morning.

Ginalski told *On Board* that he

view as censorship (see sidebar).

Paron praises teachers of all kinds who take on extracurricular roles, like journalism, but laments that newspaper advisers can be particularly tough to find. Often, English or social studies teachers are drafted into the position with little knowledge of the basics of reporting,

Who's online?

If you think print is dead and most school newspapers are online, think again. School Newspapers Online, or SNO, a Burnsville, Minn.-based organization started by a former high school newspaper adviser that helps school papers go digital, works with more than 2,200 high school sites. Jason Wallestad, SNO's cofounder and co-owner, estimates about another 6,000 to 8,000 high schools have newspapers that aren't yet online.

A superintendent recalls accusation of censoring student journalists



Student journalists from Corning-Painted Post High School's Tesseræ Yearbook strive to meet a deadline for 80 pages at the end of December.

Photo courtesy of Tesseræ Yearbook, Corning-Painted Post High School

thought that the students had a First Amendment right to publish the material, but that parents disagreed, demanding that multiple postings on multiple sites be removed. He thought he could appease the parents – and prevent the spectacle of a rally at the school the next morning – if just the material on Facebook was removed temporarily.

He had asked the district's law firm, Harris Beach, for a legal opinion, and he expected to receive it the next day. Then the district would have justification to restore the Facebook postings.

He called Michael Simons, a teacher who advised the yearbook. He asked Simon to take down the photo to give the district "breathing room" with angry

much less mastery of digital publishing platforms such as WordPress.

The newly "promoted" advisers also tend to be young teachers. When student journalists find controversial subjects to write about, the advisor can feel present but not in control – like a driver's ed teacher sitting in the passenger's seat as a student drives.

Niskayuna's Edgar said he talks to students about "tone." Student journalism, at its core, is still a learning process, he said. Edgar said he tells students that content that is "hurtful" is not appropriate for a high school news source.

But advisers say telling it straight is key, too.

"We have a saying, 'Kill the cheerleader,' said Chris Waugaman, journalism teacher at Virginia's Prince George High School. It means that when student live tweet a football game, they are expected to do it like objective reporters, not like crazed fans.

able moment," he said.

In local and national media, the events were depicted as a failed attempt by a superintendent to censor students, which baffled Ginalski.

"Censorship? I never saw it that way," Ginalski said.

While he said he had no regrets, he said he would not advise other superintendents to duplicate his strategy.

"After what I've been through the last couple of years, no, I would not recommend it," he told *On Board*. "Have the legal opinion on hand and show it to the parents."

In 2017, state Assembly member Phil Palmesano (R-Corning) introduced Student Journalist Free Speech Act "to protect student speech unless it is libelous, an invasion of privacy, or incites students to commit an unlawful act, violate school policies, or to materially and substantially disrupt the orderly operation of the school." The bill, A.8333, was referred to the Education Committee and held for consideration at the Assembly's 2018 session.

To date, 13 states have passed anti-censorship legislation, including Vermont, Massachusetts and Maryland. Under the law, administrators can still view material prior to publication and lawful take action to remove material that is not protected by the law.

Ginalski said he supports the bill. "I admire the students' passion and the manner in which they have pursued this legislation from the start," Ginalski added. "The student voice is very important in public education and as long as all views are covered equally without an agenda and all students are considered, I support the legislation."



In the Niskayuna High School, student newspaper editors (from left) Dayeon Son, Suchi Mehta, James Kemp and Katarina Mills distribute copies to faculty mail slots.

Photo courtesy of the Niskayuna Central School District