
The Debate on Censorship in Schools

The official definition of censorship, according to the online Oxford Dictionary, is “the suppression or prohibition of any parts of books, films, news, etc.” Instances of censorship can be seen all the way back to the Greek philosopher, Socrates, in 399 B.C. when the Greek state attempted to censor his philosophical teachings (The Long History of Censorship). Even today governments and corporations are caught withholding or taking away information from the public eye. Though censorship is an issue in all aspects, the one of the most controversial places of censorship is in schools.

There are countless court cases and debates arguing whether or not the schools have the right to suppress and control the information released to its students. Despite the obvious suppression of people's first amendment right, censorship in schools is a necessary form of protection and privacy implemented for the betterment of the school community.

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution protects the citizens freedom of speech and expression against all levels of government censorship. It states that “Congress shall make no law...abridging freedom of speech.” This freedom and protection is a fundamental right given to the citizens of the United States. As society has advanced, protection has even extended to cyberspace and social media. But this does not include everything; certain types of speech, defined by the constitution, are prohibited and not protected. Speech may also be regulated differently depending on the location. The parent trial for all other court cases on censorship in schools is *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent School District* from 1969. This trial set the precedent that, students do not shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression on school property unless it is disruptive.

In this case, students wore black armbands to school to silently protest the Vietnam War. School officials asked the students to remove the arm bands and, when the students refused, they were sent home. It was argued that the school violated the students first amendment rights but the Court ruled that the First Amendment applied to public schools, and that school officials could not censor student speech unless it disrupted the educational process (*Tinker v. Des Moines*). Because wearing a black armband was not disruptive, the Court held that the First Amendment protected the right of students to wear them. By siding with the students, the Supreme Court ensured that the students had the right to free speech within schools as long as it did not disrupt the learning process. *Tinker v. Des Moines* has been invoked in other Supreme Court cases since the 1969 decision.

More recently, in 2002, the Court ruled against a student who held a banner stating "Bong Hits

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4 Jesus" during a school event, arguing that the message might be interpreted as promoting illegal drug use. Since the Tinker v. Des Moines case, its principles remain upheld but have been questioned by courts around the U.S.. The Supreme Court continues to recognize the goal of Tinker was that viewpoint-specific speech restrictions are a violation of the First Amendment. On the other hand, speech that is obscene, vulgar, lewd, indecent, or school-sponsored as in the Hazelwood case, Tinker applies the authority of schools to regulate the speech, considering it would disrupt classwork and order in the school. In the Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier case, the principle prohibited student journalists from publishing an article in the school newspaper. The students wanted to publish an article on a divorced family from the school but would change the names of the people so they would not be recognized.

At first, the district court concluded that the decision of the principal to prohibit the publishing of certain student articles was inappropriate and violated the student journalists' First Amendment free speech rights (Facts and Case Summary - Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier). Then the U.S. Supreme Court held that the principal's actions did not violate the students' free speech rights. The Court noted that the paper was sponsored by the school and, as such, the school had a legitimate interest in preventing the publication of articles that it deemed inappropriate and that might draw unwanted attention to other students had the true names from the article been discovered.

This court case is the perfect example of the controversy on censorship in schools. Advocates say that its central characteristic is the suppression of an idea or image because it offends, disturbs, or threatens someone. They often target materials that discuss sexuality, religion, race and ethnicity—whether directly or indirectly. For example, some people object to the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution in science classes because it conflicts with their own religious views. Others think schools should eliminate The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn from the English curriculum because of racial references. Alternatively, those against, claim censorship attempts to suppress speech simply because it is disagreed with. In the United States, censorship more often involves social issues, and in schools it is commonly directed at "controversial" materials. The opposed also declare that their First Amendment rights are being denied with the suppression of the their free speech.

Many national and international organizations concerned with elementary and secondary education have established guidelines on censorship issues. While each organization addresses censorship a little differently, each is committed to free speech and recognizes the dangers and hardships imposed by censorship. The organizations couple their concern for free speech with a concern for balancing the rights of students, teachers and parents. Many place heavy emphasis on the importance of establishing policies for selecting classroom materials and procedures for addressing complaints.

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Modern Supreme Court decisions have made it clear that the right to free speech and expression can sometimes be subordinated to achieve legitimate educational goals, as in the Hazelwood case. A school is not comparable to a public park where anyone can march through, shouting their view or a bulletin board where anyone can post a story. While students and teachers do not “shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate” (Tinker v. Des Moines), speech is not quite as free inside educational institutions as outside. Censorship in schools is a balancing act between the first amendment rights of the students and the peace of the educational system.

The Tinker v. Des Moines case got it right; students in schools should not have their First Amendment rights taken away. But within the educational setting, the right to free speech is implemented in ways that do not interfere with schools’ educational mission. The second it becomes a disruption or a danger to the school and students, censorship becomes necessary.

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