

REQUEST FOR BOONVILLE SCHOOL RECORDS SEEKS DETAILS OF PIRATE PRESS DECISIONS

BDN Boonville
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Boonville, MO
Circ. 10332
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Dear Boonville,

It is with no small amount of regret that I today filed a Sunshine Law request with the Boonville R-1 School District.

I say regret not because I am having second thoughts about my decision to seek information pertinent to the operations of Boonville High School's student newspaper, The Pirate Press. Rather, I regret that there are still many unanswered questions.

What we know so far is that while administrators at the school district chose to reverse an earlier decision to pull issues of the paper from classrooms, they were successful at preventing the distribution of hundreds of those papers to subscribers of the Boonville Daily News. They have the legal authority to do that, as I understand it, because the student paper is a part of the curriculum of the school.

Superintendent Mark Ficken has said that he authorized the stopped distribution of the newspapers. Ficken has said this was necessary because Principal Jay Webster violated protocol by not reviewing the paper before it was printed.

"I think our staff need to start doing a better job of what keeps the educational process as a whole fluid and working," Ficken said at the time.

Pirate Press editor Emily Voss told the Student Press Law Center that the paper was sent to the printer's on a Wednesday and that the next morning, teacher Stephanie Carey advised her to let Webster preview the paper. The article by the center continued by saying that accord-

ing to Voss, Webster approved of that paper.

As of this morning, no representative of the district had provided the BDN with a copy of the protocol that Ficken said has existed for three or four years. Webster declined to comment about the protocol when approached by the BDN last week.



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According to the Web site of The Pirate Press, the student paper is subsidized by the Boonville School Board, a group of people elected by Boonville taxpayers to make decisions about the direction of the district. Webster acknowledged to the BDN that the paper is a part of the high school's curriculum but declined to comment on it further.

That silence stands in contrast to the position taken by Carey in a letter to parents earlier this year. It stated, in part: "Please feel free to contact me at any point in time about your student and the journalism department." The same letter, posted to the paper's Web site, notes that Carey is in her fourteenth year of "teaching scholastic journalism and advising publications."

They are statements that — if taken at face value — indicate a willingness to be transparent about the Boonville journalism program and considerable experience as a publication adviser.

But since the morning that distribution of the papers was halted, Carey has not returned voicemails left by the BDN on her answering machine at the school. Webster did not return voicemails left at his school account on multiple days and repeatedly declined to comment about the paper during a meeting at the





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school's office.

The pursuit of journalism is predicated on a doctrine of transparency — the idea that sources will be identified, multiple perspectives gathered and analysis made. Up to this point, the timeline of events surrounding the distribution of The Pirate Press is muddy, and administrators' comments have raised more questions than answers.

It is my sincere hope that the documents the BDN is seeking will reveal a simple misunderstanding among staff, a clear direction as to how future student papers should be edited and published, and written statements from administrators expressing their support of the paper, its student staff and adviser.

In the event that the documents raise questions, it is my hope that all parties will be eager to answer them, to add clarification and context as good journalism dictates.

As Carey wrote in her letter to parents: "The focus of the journalism department is scholastic journalism, which includes mastering information assimilation, interviewing, photography, all types of journalistic writing, organization and graphic design. As I'm sure you know, these skills are ones that are useful in many other areas of life."

In my opinion, it is a noble goal to empower people with the information they need to make decisions. It is what good journalism dictates.

It is my hope that representatives of the Boonville R-1 School District agree.

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