

Pirate Press editor talks distribution decisions

By Nate Birt

// News and online editor //

Emily Voss said Monday afternoon that she would like clarification from district officials about what can acceptably be printed in The Pirate Press, Boonville High School's student newspaper.

Voss, who is editor-in-chief of the paper, said that since her staff learned of Superintendent Mark Ficken's decision to not distribute some copies of the Oct. 2 issue of the paper, planning for the next issue has become more complicated. Voss said she advised some of the staff during a storyboard session — during which story ideas are discussed — that some ideas will have to wait.

"We are way more careful," said Voss, who said she has been on the paper's staff for the past three years. Voss said that she has never seen any type of district protocol requiring prior review and that journalism teacher Stephanie Carey and Principal Jay Webster have been very supportive of the paper.

Her comments came after Ficken said Oct. 2 that he had stopped distribution of some issues of the student paper because of a violation of a school protocol he said has existed for three or four years. Specifically, Ficken said, he received a call from Webster saying that he had not reviewed the paper before it was printed.

Voss said that proofs of the Pirate Press were sent to be printed late Sept. 30. The

next day, Carey sent copies of those proofs to Webster for review, Voss said. At about 10 a.m. Oct. 1, Voss said, Webster came and spoke with she and Carey. He said that while he would probably get a number of phone calls in reference to the paper, he was OK with it, Voss said.

Voss said she picked up copies of the paper on the night of Oct. 1 and that she and others began distributing the paper at about 10:30 Oct. 2. It was sometime later that she began hearing rumors from her staff that students were being asked to pick up copies that had been distributed, she said. Later, Carey passed on the word that Ficken had recalled the paper and that copies must be picked up, Voss said.

Students from the newspaper and yearbook staffs began picking up papers that had been distributed, including those that were lying on teachers' desks or stuffed into students' books, Voss said. She said they were able to gather a substantial number of copies.

Voss said she then decided to call the Student Press Law Center to determine how she should respond to the decision. She said a center representative told her to get a written explanation of the decision to pull the paper and to write a request for any records connected with that decision. She was told to go

first to the principal, Voss said.

During her sixth-hour class, she and Carey spoke with Webster, Voss said. Webster had a copy of the paper and pointed at articles that he said Ficken did and did not like, Voss said.

She said an article in which students were quoted as saying buses were overcrowded was written by a freshman reporter.

"It wasn't really that much opinion from our writer," Voss said of the article.

Ficken has said the reporter should have spoken with a

transportation official to get a better balance in the story.

Webster presented suggestions for how the articles could have been written differently, Voss said.

An article about perceptions of gay people was handled carefully, Voss said. All of those named in the article had reviewed the text of their interview to verify that they were quoted correctly and then signed off on it, Voss said. Another student interviewed for that article had reviewed the entire article before the paper was distributed, Voss said.

"I thought this was a great article," Voss said.

Ficken has said it was inappropriate that one article in the two-page discrimination section included a quote about freaks in reference to gay people. In cases such as that one, Ficken said, editors must take more care about the quotes they choose to place in articles.

"It can be disruptive to the educational process," Ficken said at the time.

At the end of that meeting, the staff learned that Ficken had reversed his decision on the student papers and that those could be distributed at the school, Voss said. She said she doesn't know whether Webster was told why Ficken had changed his mind.

In the wake of that decision, Voss said, she wrote up her request for information about Ficken's decision regarding the Pirate Press per guidelines provided by the Student Press Law Center.

In a records request addressed to Ficken and dated Oct. 5, Voss wrote that she sought a written explanation about why the first issue was initially pulled from students and not distributed to readers

of the Boonville Daily News.

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The BDN has previously reported that papers scheduled to be distributed to Boonville readers of the BDN were held at the request of Boonville administrators.

Voss also stated in her request that she sought "a copy of any relations between the high school administration, the superintendent, and any school board members involved in the decision to stop the distribution of the Pirate Press. Relations include phone calls, emails, etc."

In a response to the letter from Voss, the district's Pam Jaeger wrote: "Although you correctly cite the Missouri Sunshine Act as requiring the district to disclose certain records and information to the public upon request, however, there are no District records responsive to your request." Ficken was copied onto the response, the letter states.

The BDN on Monday submitted a 15-point records request to the district seeking,

among other documents, a copy of the editing protocol Ficken described Oct. 2 and electronic correspondence among Ficken, Webster, Carey and school board members.

Voss said that Webster has been very supportive of the paper for a long time

and that he has worked with staff on multiple occasions.

"For this issue, he's had a hard job," Voss said.

Webster said Ficken has indicated that he plans to meet with her, Voss said. But she said that such a meeting hadn't happened as of Wednesday.

Voss said she wants several things from administrators in response to decisions about the Pirate Press. Voss said that she would like an expla-

nation of those decisions so that staff will know how to proceed in the future, and she said she wants Ficken and the school board to communicate more often and more effectively with the newspaper staff so that they can deal with future concerns together. She said she wishes the Oct. 2 issue could be distributed so that the community could see the content showing what students are doing and thinking.

Members of the newspaper staff are mad about the decision because their work and the work of other high school students isn't being seen, Voss said. Some students don't understand why the newspapers were initially pulled, Voss said.

"It's sad because I wish we could still cover the things that were affecting our students," she said.

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