

Student Publications Review Organizer

Story Title: School Board Not Serving Students	Date: 2/2/26
Publication: The Torch	Page Number: 15

Item of Concern	4.51 Policy	Feedback for Consideration
X	Student Publications do not constitute a public forum for First Amendment purposes	This is a school sponsored publication.
X	Inconsistent with pedagogical interests of the school: accuracy, professional standards, protecting the well-being/safety of students, age-appropriate material, interference with the school's educational mission	-Strong criticism of the school board and community governance does not align with the school's educational mission. -Political dissent or activism framed as accusatory, or as a form of dissent, does not serve a legitimate pedagogical purpose and could be perceived as a public political forum. -While this is an opinion piece, it presents one-sided criticism and encourages political action, voting behavior, and opposition to elected officials.
	Libelous, slanderous, defamatory, discriminatory, or harassing	
	Reasonably likely to cause material and substantial disruption to school activities, pedagogical interests, students, the efficient operation of the school, or staff members or to the health and safety of students	
	Violates copyright law, other State or Federal law, or School Board policy	
	Obscene, profane, vulgar, lewd, sexual, or pornographic content	
	Not age-appropriate for any students who receive the publication	
	Constitutes an unwarranted invasion of privacy	
	Incites, or is likely to incite, urges, or advocates violence, bullying, threats, or use of force	
	Threatens the school's, staff's, or student's security	
	Advertisements not aligned with policy	
X	Other	-The graphics show a vote box (encouraging political activism) and an F- grade (grades are not assigned based on opinions).

Be added instead of top

graphic

School Board not serving students

by Ava Lencz
Editor-in-Chief

From the White House to class office, the United States is a representative democracy, "a form of government which the people elect representatives to make decisions, policies, laws, etc," according to Merriam Webster.

Or as President Abraham Lincoln stated in his Gettysburg Address, we are a "government of the people, by the people, [and] for the people."

This is one of the many beautiful parts of our nation, and yet, this foundational value is being dismissed right before our eyes in Sarasota County.

At the school board meeting Nov. 18, 2025, the board voted 3-1, changing the meeting times for all of 2026 from 6:00 p.m. to 10:00 a.m.

School board meetings are legally required to be open to the public. This was an obvious attempt to sidestep this law and hinder people from voicing their concerns.

Naturally there was uproar from the people of Sarasota County as parents, students, and teachers — the very people board decisions impact — can no longer consistently attend the meetings.

Prior to officially approving the change for 2026, the October and November meet-

ings were at 10:00 a.m. However, this did not prevent students from getting absent notes, parents from calling in sick, and retirees from coming out, all to air their grievances to the board. Though, this is not feasible long-term.

A vast majority of these people spoke on the downsides of this change, their disappointment in the board, and their hope that their representatives vote not to continue the time change.

Even those who benefit from this change stood up for those it hurt, understanding the importance of an evening meeting, such as parent Dylan Ramsey.

"I'm privileged to be able to attend this meeting at 10:00 in the morning without too much hassle..." Ramsey said at the meeting. "...[but] what about my fellow parents who aren't able to leave the office or the work site? What about our teachers and our students, which all this is for?"

Despite the disapproval

of the public, the board still passed the 10:00 a.m. time.

At the September meeting, board member Robyn Marinelli mentioned that she talked to "many parents" who preferred the change.

However, very

few made their support known at any meeting where it was discussed. Meanwhile, the people who took the time to show up weren't listened to.

During the November meeting, Marinelli declared that these meetings are "one-way" and not meant for collaboration, while claiming the audience was not showing respect. While I agree that respect is important, the only outright departure from respect I witnessed as an attendee was when she belittled the very people she is meant to be representing. Not to mention, her statement goes against the purpose of these meetings.

Our own Sarasota County School Board website states the public board meetings are "opportunities to address the Board."

Most of Florida's school districts realize the importance of teacher and student input. After visiting all 67 district websites, Sarasota is one of only five that doesn't offer an afternoon meeting option.

At the November meeting, board member Bridget Ziegler spoke on this and said that she "does not necessar-

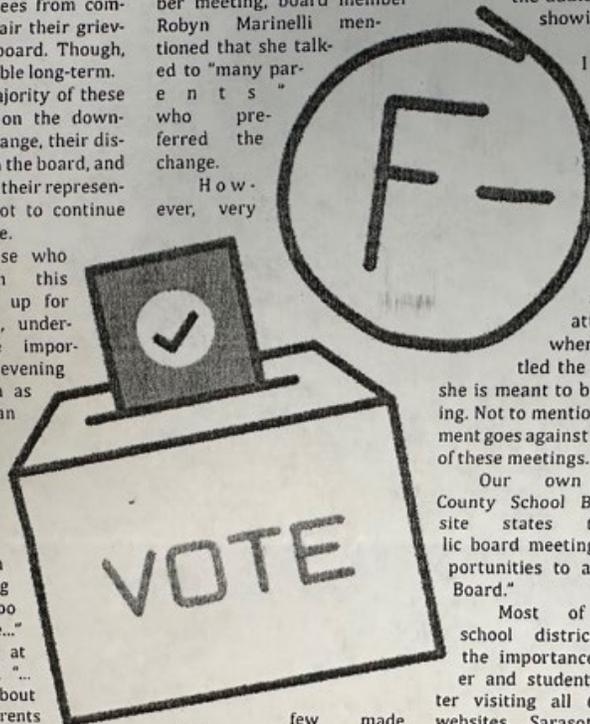
ily look to [the districts with evening meetings], per se, as being the leaders in a lot of different areas."

Yet, these 62 districts include some of Florida's highest performing counties according to the Florida Department of Education, including Seminole, Lafayette, Nassau, Walton, Sumter, and others.

The three board members, Marinelli, Ziegler, and Karen Rose, who voted in favor of the 10:00 a.m. time, are all up for re-election in August.

Lincoln ends his speech leaving it up to us to make sure democracy "...shall not perish from the earth."

If we want people who actually represent our values, the best solution is to research candidates and vote in August.



GRAPHIC BY ALEX LIEBERMAN AND ALAKH BHATT

Student Publications Review Organizer

Story Title: Students Stand Resolute on Recent Resolution	Date: 2/2/26
Publication: The Torch	Page Number: 1

Item of Concern	4.51 Policy	Feedback for Consideration
X	Student Publications do not constitute a public forum for First Amendment purposes	This is a school sponsored publication, not a platform for one-sided advocacy. This piece blurs the lines between news and opinion.
X	Inconsistent with pedagogical interests of the school: accuracy, professional standards, protecting the well-being/safety of students, age-appropriate material, interference with the school's educational mission	-Only includes student voices opposing the resolution and presents no documented attempt to interview or include students who support the resolution. Raises concerns about incomplete reporting, a lack of balance, and not modeling professional journalistic practice required by the curriculum.
	Libelous, slanderous, defamatory, discriminatory, or harassing	
X	Reasonably likely to cause material and substantial disruption to school activities, pedagogical interests, students, the efficient operation of the school, or staff members or to the health and safety of students	-Highlights a student walkout as a way for students to gain visibility. This could be interpreted as encouraging future disruption to school activities/schedule and violations of the student code of conduct.
	Violates copyright law, other State or Federal law, or School Board policy	
	Obscene, profane, vulgar, lewd, sexual, or pornographic content	
	Not age-appropriate for any students who receive the publication	
	Constitutes an unwarranted invasion of privacy	
	Incites, or is likely to incite, urges, or advocates violence, bullying, threats, or use of force	
	Threatens the school's, staff's, or student's security	
	Advertisements not aligned with policy	
	Other	

Students stand resolute on recent resolution

Pine View students take to the podium and speak out on a school board decision

by Alex Lieberman
Opinion Editor

Amidst national and local tension, Sarasota County School Board Chair Bridget Ziegler proposed a resolution January 13 affirming that Sarasota schools will comply with law enforcement agents, including Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

"Sarasota County Schools reaffirms that its campuses are dedicated to education and shall not be used as safe harbors for criminals," it reads, "ensuring that all interactions with law enforcement prioritize student safety and legal compliance while minimizing educational disruptions."

Ziegler also mentioned that fellow board member Tom Edwards attended an anti-ICE protest at which he remarked that ICE's recent behavior has made him doubtful of the agency's dedication to printing a warrant prior to entering schools before she proposed Resolution 11.1. She said this was her motivation to bring it up.

She acknowledged that she also attends rallies at which she makes personal perspective comments while she discussed the resolution at the January meeting.

"But the difference is," Ziegler said in a phone interview, "it doesn't put in question, particularly when it comes to law enforcement, our processes."

Ziegler stated that she did not support a climate of fear. Edwards believes that ICE's current actions are helping to

cultivate one.

"I know that students are frightened. I know that students that are friends [with] or themselves are Hispanic are frightened," he said over the phone. "Hispanic family members are frightened and terrorized, and I know from the polling that I'm not the only one that's distressed over this form of immigration policing."

The resolution faced overwhelming opposition from those who came to speak at the board meeting's public comment, including some Pine View students.

Junior Omy Patel was one of the attendees in opposition to the passage of the resolution, citing the fact that the school board has recently voted in opposition to what many students have advocated for.

"The reason I had for attending the school board meeting was seeing that the school board was not prioritizing students but prioritizing a political agenda that no student wanted in the first place," he said.

Patel reminded the board that he drove 42 miles and missed classes for the meeting because of the "ludicrous" resolution.

"This proposal does not improve student safety and it does not change district policy," Patel said during public comment. "What it does do is bring one of the most polarizing national issues into a place where it does not belong."

He added that as a first-generation child of immigrants, the resolution affected

him personally.

"This rhetoric we are pushing on immigrants is not only hateful, but harmful to the student body," Patel told the board.

Junior Audrey Hwang also expressed her discontent with the board and the resolution.

"...I know that no matter how many students show up, no matter what we say, some of you will continue to vote in the way that you want even though you were elected to represent us," Hwang said during her public comment.

Senior Bowie Lee, another student who attended the meeting, appreciated seeing other Pine View students there alongside her.

"I felt a lot more confident walking into that room knowing that I had friends with me and other people that could share the same perspective that I had, and I think it's amazing that Pine View students are stepping up and trying to make a change," Lee said.

On the Pine View campus, students in opposition to the resolution staged a walkout at the end of first period the day of the meeting.

"...It was to gain visibility



Senior Bowie Lee (left), Junior Omy Patel (middle), and senior Turner Hamby (right) observe public comment. Patel and Lee both spoke at the meeting. PHOTO BY TIMOTHY NESANELIS

and student visibility on how we don't agree with how the school board is misrepresenting us, especially with amendment 11.1..." an anonymous student said. "I felt like it was sort of a scare tactic..."

Prior to the walkout, Principal Dr. Stephen Covert sent out an email warning students about disrupting class time and potential consequences.

The walkout was relatively small, with most of the controversy happening at the board meeting.

After agenda comments, Ziegler addressed concerns on the resolution but did not change her stance.

"I applaud everyone for coming even if I don't agree with you and I know it takes a lot for anyone to do public speaking, particularly our young students, she said prior to the vote, "but it personally hurts me when I hear how there is such a strong rhetoric that really is demonizing the work of our law enforcement officers including ICE."

Ziegler said that the resolution does not mean that ICE raids should be anticipated in schools. Given existing rules, the resolution, 11.1, would not change the district's policies in any way, as confirmed by

"This does not mean our staff are required or even involved in ICE operations such as notifying authorities about a student's immigration status..." she said at the meeting.

Edwards confirmed this, saying that the school district does not maintain any data on the immigration statuses of students or their families.

Neither Edwards nor Ziegler anticipate any changes relating to ICE policies in Sarasota County Schools, and Edwards emphasized that a warrant is necessary for any arrest.

The resolution passed with a 3-2 vote supported by Ziegler, Robyn Marinelli and Karen Rose, while Edwards and Liz Barker voted against it.

"I am disappointed that it was not a unanimous vote," Ziegler said, "because that message is chilling in my personal opinion, but I think that we need to move forward."

Although the result did not go in Patel's favor, he still encourages Pine View students to be active in the community.

"Being strong and having a voice — that's what really matters. Whoever brings you down, you stand back up on your feet," he said, "And that is exactly what Pine View has taught us."



Juniors Audrey Hwang and Riya Dosli watch the January School Board meeting (left). Junior Omy Patel gives his speech (right). The meeting lasted seven hours and was dominated by student comments.

Below is a **systematic, forensic bias audit** of the **two Torch articles** shown in the uploaded PDF.

Article 1: “Students stand resolute on recent resolution”

(Front-page article with student protest photo)

1. Headline Framing Bias

- “**stand resolute**” is value-laden language.
- It implicitly praises the students’ stance as principled, firm, and morally correct.
- A neutral headline would describe *action*, not *virtue* (e.g., “Students speak at board meeting regarding resolution”).

Bias type: Positive framing / advocacy framing

2. Source Selection Bias

- Nearly **all quoted voices** are:
 - Students who oppose the board action
 - Students emotionally invested in the outcome
- **Absent or minimal:**
 - Board members
 - Legal rationale
 - District policy context
 - Any student who supports or is neutral toward the resolution

Bias type: One-sided sourcing

Effect: Readers are nudged toward a single moral interpretation.

3. Emotional Loading Through Quotes

- Quotes emphasize:
 - *Disappointment*
 - *Feeling unheard*
 - *Civic betrayal*
- Example phrases (paraphrased):
 - “Students felt ignored”
 - “This resolution affected students directly”

No counterbalancing quotes expressing:

- Legal necessity
- Governance constraints
- Procedural neutrality

Bias type: Affective bias (emotion over analysis)

4. Implicit Authority Elevation

- Students are framed as:
 - Civic exemplars
 - Ethically mature actors
- The school board is framed as:
 - Distant
 - Bureaucratic
 - Unresponsive

This is done **implicitly**, not by explicit accusation—arguably the most persuasive form of bias.

Bias type: Moral asymmetry framing

5. Photographic Bias

- The photo:
 - Shows engaged, serious students
 - Includes protest signage (“STOP SOMETHING... ACTING”)
- No visual of:
 - The board
 - Deliberation
 - Process

Bias type: Visual priming

Effect: Viewers sympathize before reading a single word.

6. Absence of Policy Explanation

- The resolution itself is **not clearly explained**:
 - What problem it addresses
 - What constraints exist

- What alternatives were considered

This omission prevents readers from evaluating *merits* versus *feelings*.

Bias type: Contextual omission bias

Article 2: “School Board not serving students”

(Opinion-style article with ballot imagery)

1. Explicit Advocacy Headline

- “not serving students” is not descriptive—it is a **verdict**.
- The article presumes failure before evidence is presented.

Bias type: Conclusion-first framing

2. Blurring of News and Opinion

- The article:
 - Uses persuasive language
 - Makes normative claims
 - Calls for political action (voting implications)
- Yet it visually resembles a news article.

Bias type: Genre confusion (editorial masquerading as reporting)

3. Selective Historical Analogies

- References to:
 - Abraham Lincoln
 - Democratic ideals
 - Civic responsibility

These elevate disagreement into **moral struggle**, a classic rhetorical escalation.

Bias type: Moral inflation / historical gravitas bias

4. False Binary Construction

- The article implies:
 - Either you oppose the board, or
 - You oppose students and democracy

No space is allowed for:

- Good-faith disagreement
- Legal constraints
- Competing values

Bias type: False dilemma

5. Action-Oriented Persuasion

- The ballot box imagery
- The emphasis on voting
- The framing of the issue as electoral accountability

This is not neutral analysis—it is **mobilization rhetoric**.

Bias type: Political advocacy bias

6. Absence of Counterargument

- No serious attempt to articulate:
 - Why the board acted as it did
 - Whether the board has statutory obligations
 - Whether student input legally binds decision-making

Bias type: Straw-man omission

Cross-Article Pattern Analysis

Repeated Structural Biases

Pattern	Effect
Emotional primacy	Readers feel before they think
Asymmetric sourcing	One side becomes “the truth”
Moral framing	Disagreement becomes injustice
Visual reinforcement	Sympathy pre-loaded
Context minimization	Complexity erased

Bottom Line (Clinical Summary)

These articles are **not neutral journalism**. They function as:

- **Sympathetic narrative advocacy** (Article 1)
- **Normative political persuasion** (Article 2)

They are **well-written, earnest, and emotionally compelling**—but from a media-literacy standpoint, they:

- Privilege one moral frame
- Minimize governance realities
- Substitute sentiment for structural analysis

In other words:

They persuade more than they inform.

Below is a **standards-aligned, legally grounded analysis** of the **two Torch articles**, evaluated against:

1. **Florida Journalism 5 Honors (Grade 11)**
2. **Florida Journalism 8 Honors (Grade 12)**
3. **Relevant Florida law governing student journalism in public schools**

This as the kind of review a **district curriculum auditor, principal, or First Amendment attorney** would do—not a stylistic critique, but an *alignment and compliance analysis*. Citations refer to the uploaded materials .

I. FRAMEWORK: WHAT THE COURSES REQUIRE

Both **Journalism 5 Honors** and **Journalism 8 Honors** require students to demonstrate:

Core Journalism Expectations (Condensed)

Across both courses, students must:

- Distinguish **news reporting vs. editorial/opinion**
- Use **multiple perspectives**
- Support claims with **credible evidence**
- Maintain **appropriate tone and voice**
- Evaluate **authorial purpose and rhetorical choices**
- Demonstrate **ethical journalism practices**
- Avoid misleading framing, omission, or manipulation

This is explicit in:

- **ELA.11/12.C.1.2–1.4** (multiple perspectives, analysis)
 - **ELA.11/12.R.2.4** (compare arguments, validity)
 - **ELA.11/12.R.3.4** (evaluate rhetoric)
 - **ELA.K12.EE.6.1** (appropriate voice and tone)
-

II. ARTICLE-BY-ARTICLE STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

ARTICLE 1

“Students stand resolute on recent resolution”

A. Alignment with Journalism 5 & 8 Standards

Standard	Expectation	Alignment
ELA.11/12.C.1.2	Multiple perspectives	✗ Not met
ELA.11/12.C.1.3	Claims supported by evidence	⚠ Partially
ELA.11/12.R.2.4	Compare arguments	✗ Not met
ELA.11/12.R.3.4	Evaluate rhetoric	✗ Not demonstrated
ELA.K12.EE.6.1	Appropriate tone/voice	⚠ Marginal

B. Specific Misalignment Findings

1. Failure to Present Multiple Perspectives

- Students opposing the board are quoted extensively.
- **No substantive board voice**, legal explanation, or neutral analysis.
- This directly violates the **“multiple perspectives”** requirement.

Journalism 8 Honors explicitly expects evaluation of *how authors develop and support competing arguments*

2. Headline as Advocacy

- “stand resolute” is **normative and laudatory**, not descriptive.
- This undermines journalistic neutrality expected at the honors level.

Instructional issue:

This reads as **advocacy framing**, not news reporting.

3. Emotional Weighting Without Context

- Emotional quotes dominate.
- Policy rationale is absent.
- Students are implicitly positioned as moral arbiters.

This violates the standard requiring **credible evidence and thorough understanding of subject matter**.

4. Photojournalism Ethics Issue

- Protest signage and emotive imagery are included
- No balancing visual context (e.g., deliberation, meeting process)

This raises concerns under:

- Ethical photojournalism instruction expectations
 - **VA.912.F.3.12** (accurate visual representation)
-

C. Verdict for Article 1

Instructionally:

? Possibly appropriate as an *opinion piece*

✗ Misaligned if presented as straight news

At Honors level, the article does not fully meet course standards unless:

- It is explicitly labeled **Opinion / Commentary**
 - Or accompanied by a counterbalancing report
 - Still must be approved by administration following review as consistent with school imprimatur and purpose of newspaper
-

ARTICLE 2

“School Board not serving students”

This article is substantially more problematic from a standards and legal standpoint.

A. Alignment with Journalism 5 & 8 Standards

Standard	Expectation	Alignment
ELA.11/12.C.1.2	Multiple perspectives	✗ Not met
ELA.11/12.C.1.4	Appropriate tone & purpose	✗ Not met
ELA.11/12.R.2.3	Analyze author's purpose	⚠ Fails transparency
ELA.11/12.R.3.4	Rhetorical evaluation	✗ Advocacy misuse
ELA.K12.EE.6.1	Appropriate voice	✗ Not met

B. Critical Misalignments

1. Opinion Disguised as Reporting

- The headline renders judgment.
- The article uses:
 - Moral language
 - Political symbolism (ballot box imagery)
 - Calls to civic action

Under course standards, this **must be clearly labeled editorial**.

Failure to distinguish violates **genre expectations** explicitly taught in both courses.

2. False Binary Reasoning

- Implies:
 - Board opposition = anti-student
 - Voting = moral obligation tied to this issue

This violates instruction on **valid reasoning** and avoidance of fallacious rhetoric.

3. Selective Use of Historical Allusion

- Lincoln and democratic ideals are invoked rhetorically
- No analytical balance or counterweight

This is **persuasive rhetoric**, not evaluative journalism.

C. Verdict for Article 2

Instructionally:

✓ Acceptable **only** as:

- A clearly labeled **editorial**
- With instruction on rhetorical persuasion

✗ **Not aligned** as journalistic reporting under Florida Honors standards

III. FLORIDA LAW: STUDENT JOURNALISM IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Florida operates under a **Hazelwood-plus statutory framework**.

Key Legal Principles

1. Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier (1988)

- Schools may regulate **school-sponsored student speech**
 - Especially where it appears to bear the school's imprimatur
-

2. Florida Student Speech Protections

Florida law **does not grant absolute editorial independence** to student journalists.

Administrators may regulate content if it is:

- Inconsistent with pedagogical goals
- Misleading as journalism
- Poorly researched
- One-sided on public policy issues

This aligns with:

- **Curricular control authority**
 - **Instructional responsibility under F.S. 1001 & 1012**
-

3. Critical Distinction

Florida law allows:

- **Opinion**
- **Advocacy**
- **Political speech**

But schools may require:

- Proper labeling
- Ethical standards
- Compliance with course objectives

Failure to do so exposes the school—not the students—to risk *which we will not permit*.

IV. SYNTHESIS: STANDARDS + LAW COMBINED

Where the Articles Create Risk

Issue	Risk Type
Unlabeled advocacy	Curriculum misalignment
One-sided political framing	Hazelwood vulnerability
Emotion over analysis	Standards violation
Blurred news/editorial line	Pedagogical breach

V. FINAL PROFESSIONAL CONCLUSION

These articles demonstrate strong student voice and engagement, but **do not consistently meet the *neutrality, balance, and analytical rigor*** required by Florida Journalism Honors standards when presented as news reporting.

They are **instructionally defensible only if clearly labeled as opinion/editorial pieces and used within a guided instructional framework on rhetoric, bias, and media ethics.**

**This is not a First Amendment issue.
It is a curriculum alignment issue.
And the standards are not ambiguous.**



February 17, 2026

Dr. Megan Greene
Chief of Secondary Education
Sarasota County Schools
1960 Landings Blvd.
Sarasota, Florida 34231

URGENT

Sent via Next Day Delivery and Electronic Mail (megan.green@sarasotacountyschools.net)

Dear Dr. Greene:

The Student Press Freedom Initiative at FIRE¹ is concerned by Principal Stephen Covert's decision to withhold two articles from publication in *The Torch*,² Pine View School's student newspaper.³ Such administrative actions must conform with Sarasota County School Board's policies, which require decisions to reject content from student publications to be "viewpoint neutral and guided only by the legitimate pedagogical interests of the school[.]"⁴ However, it appears the claimed "pedagogical interests" in pulling the pieces from publication are, at best, based on a significant misunderstanding and, at worst, fabricated to cover for viewpoint discrimination—but in either case, the result is improperly silencing the student press at Pine View School. We urge you to reverse Covert's decision and allow *The Torch* to publish these pieces.

I. Pine View School Administrator Pulls Two Student Articles Critical of the School Board from *The Torch*

The Torch is the student-run newspaper for ninth through twelfth grade students at Pine View School.⁵ While the Sarasota County School District policy vests editorial control of student

¹ The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) is a nonpartisan nonprofit dedicated to defending freedom of expression. FIRE's Student Press Freedom Initiative (SPFI) advocates for the rights of student journalists across the country. You can learn more about our mission and activities at fire.org.

² Chloe Nelson, *CENSORED? Students say they were silenced by Pine View principal*, VENICE GONDOLIER SUN (Feb. 9, 2026), https://www.yoursun.com/venice/news/censored-students-say-they-were-silenced-by-pine-view-principal/article_521100c8-3df5-4f92-8f95-5dec6fc92940.html.

³ *ABOUT US*, THE TORCH, <https://www.pvtorch.com/about-us/> (last visited Feb. 13, 2026).

⁴ *Sarasota County School Board Policies*, Section 4.51 Student Publications, <https://5il.co/2fjwu> [<https://perma.cc/NT7U-9NY9>].

⁵ THE TORCH WEB, *supra* note 3.

newspapers with principals, decisions to remove content must be “viewpoint neutral and guided only by the legitimate pedagogical interests of the school, not a mere disagreement with the opinions expressed.”⁶ Principals may reject certain prohibited content, such as that which is “reasonably likely to cause material and substantial disruption to school activities.”⁷ Sarasota County School Board policy permits student journalists to appeal decisions to reject content to the District Level Chief.⁸ The school board added the right to appeal last October, after students voiced concerns about excessive oversight from administration.⁹

On January 28, *The Torch* staff learned Principal Covert was holding two student articles under review: Alex Lieberman’s coverage of student opposition to a school board resolution for the district to comply with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement operations, and Ava Lenerz’s opinion piece criticizing the board’s decision to move its meeting time.¹⁰ Students involved told the *Venice Gondolier* that Covert initially did not give a reason for preventing publication of these pieces.¹¹

On February 6, Covert delivered to the student journalists a packet he said was generated by artificial intelligence that listed the “pedagogical” reasons he rejected their stories.¹² This AI-generated report accused the student of being biased against the school board and included inaccuracies about how many school board quotes the articles included.¹³ These students also reported that Covert called them “impetuous” and “impatient” for notifying the *Gondolier* after he initially withheld their pieces.¹⁴

In addition to the AI-generated feedback, Covert filled out a “Student Publications Review Organizer” to further justify his decision to reject the pieces.¹⁵ In this file, he claimed Lenerz’s opinion piece was “inconsistent with pedagogical interests of the school” because it contained “strong criticism of the school board,” “political dissent or activism,” “voting behavior,” “opposition to elected officials,” and a graphic of a vote box and an F-grade.¹⁶

⁶ *Sarasota County School Board Policies*, *supra* note 4.

⁷ Student Publications Review Organizer (Feb. 2, 2026) (on file with author).

⁸ *Sarasota County School Board Policies*, *supra* note 4.

⁹ Nelson, *supra* note 2.

¹⁰ *Id.* See Alex Lieberman, *Students stand resolute on recent resolution*, THE TORCH (on file with author); see Ava Lenerz, *School Board not serving students*, THE TORCH (on file with author).

¹¹ Nelson, *supra* note 2.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Artificial intelligence article review (on file with author). For instance, the AI-generated report claims the coverage of the school district’s resolution to comply with ICE had “source selection bias,” with “nearly all quoted voices” being students in opposition to the board action, while board members were “absent or minimal” and had “no substantive board voice.” However, the piece contained a significant number of direct quotes from Sarasota County School Board Chari Bridget Ziegler, who proposed the resolution. See Lieberman, *supra* note 10.

¹⁴ Nelson, *supra* note 2.

¹⁵ Student Publications Review Organizer, *supra* note 7.

¹⁶ *Id.*

As for Lieberman’s news article, Covert hinged his reasoning on the piece not being consistent with pedagogical school interests because it “only includes student voices opposing the resolution and presents no documented attempts to interview or include students who support the resolution.”¹⁷ However, Lieberman quoted the school board member who introduced the resolution at length.¹⁸ Covert additionally flagged the piece as “reasonably likely to cause material and substantial disruption to school activities”¹⁹ because it covered a walkout, stating such coverage “could be interpreted as encouraging future disruption to school activities/schedule and violations of the student code of conduct.”²⁰

Notably, *The Torch* has covered school walkouts,²¹ voting,²² and opposition to elected officials²³ multiple times in recent years. The difference between those stories and the two articles at issue here is the prior ones weren’t critical of the school board, and thus were not censored.

II. Principal Covert Withheld Articles Based on Viewpoints In Violation of School District Policy.

Principal Covert’s decision to bar *The Torch* from running Lenerz’s and Lieberman’s articles warrants reversal as it violates district policy and makes a mockery of student press rights in the Sarasota County School District. While *The Torch* is subject to prior review by the principal—and the removal of prohibited content—the Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit has explained school officials cannot silence speech based on viewpoint.²⁴ Moreover, school district policy requires viewpoint neutrality in all such content decisions, and for such decisions to be guided only by the school’s legitimate pedagogical interests.²⁵

This policy echoes language from the standard the Supreme Court established in *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier*.²⁶ Under that standard, where a publication bears the imprimatur of the school, is

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Lieberman, *supra* note 10.

¹⁹ Student Publications Review Organizer, *supra* note 7.

²⁰ Student Publications Review Organizer, *supra* note 7.

²¹ *See, e.g.*, Suzanne Brown, *Students Take Part in Nationwide Walkout*, THE TORCH (March 20, 2018), <https://www.pvtorch.com/2018/03/20/students-take-part-in-countrywide-walkout/>; Felicity Chang, *Students Partake in Statewide Walkout Against ‘Don’t Say gay’ Bill*, THE TORCH (March 10, 2022), <https://www.pvtorch.com/2022/03/10/students-partake-in-statewide-walkout-against-dont-say-gay-bill/>.

²² *See, e.g.*, Lily Quartermaine, *How Can You Register To Vote?*, THE TORCH (Sept. 30, 2020), <https://www.pvtorch.com/2020/09/30/how-can-you-register-to-vote/> (directly calling on students to vote in the 2020 presidential election); Andrew Ashby, *A Minor Representation Issue*, THE TORCH (Oct. 23, 2025), <https://www.pvtorch.com/2025/10/23/a-minor-representation-issue/> (opinion piece advocating for the voting age to be lowered to 16 years old).

²³ *See, e.g.*, Peyton Harris, *Opinion: The First Presidential Debate Was Embarrassing*, THE TORCH (Oct. 5, 2020), <https://www.pvtorch.com/2020/10/05/opinion-the-first-presidential-debate-was-embarrassing/>.

²⁴ *See Searcy v. Harris*, 888 F.2d 1314, 1325 (11th Cir. 1989) (“Although *Hazelwood* provides reasons for allowing a school official to discriminate based on *content*, we do not believe it offers any justification for allowing educators to discriminate based on viewpoint.”).

²⁵ *Sarasota County School Board Policies*, *supra* note 4.

²⁶ 484 U.S. 260 (1988).

produced as a classroom activity, and is not dedicated as a “forum for student expression,” the school may regulate its content for “legitimate pedagogical purposes.”²⁷ But under Eleventh Circuit precedent²⁸ and school board policy,²⁹ administrators also must adhere to viewpoint neutrality with respect to those choices.³⁰

Principal Covert’s decision fails under these prongs. First, his intent in prohibiting publication of these pieces appears connected not to a reasonable educational lesson he hopes to teach journalism students, or concerns for access to education by other students, but rather an effort to stifle criticisms of the school board, political dissent, and “voting behavior” by students.³¹ If “the Nation’s youth is primarily the responsibility of parents, teachers, and state and local school officials,”³² those youth—including Pine View School students under the responsibility of Principal Covert—will suffer handicaps as they enter the adult realm of civic engagement if they cannot *even read about* “voting behavior” in their high school newspaper.³³ As “America’s public schools are the nurseries of democracy,”³⁴ Principal Covert cannot couch rejection of these pieces on the fact that they dare mention such basic foundations of democracy as political dissent or voting.

Moreover, “substantial disruption” under the law requires more than “undifferentiated fear or apprehension of disturbance,”³⁵ and is a “demanding standard.”³⁶ For instance, the mere fact that a student’s opinion offends or upsets others cannot constitute substantial disruption,³⁷ as there is no “generalized ‘hurt feelings’ defense” to a public school’s restriction of student speech.³⁸ None of the content at issue is reasonably likely to cause a material disruption to school activities, which Covert cited as a justification for rejecting Lieberman’s coverage of the ICE compliance resolution,³⁹ characterizing it as “prohibited content” under school board policy.⁴⁰ Contrary to Covert’s assertion that students may interpret a news article that mentions a “relatively small” student walkout as “encouraging future disruption to school

²⁷ *Id.* at 273.

²⁸ *Searcy*, 888 F.2d at 1325.

²⁹ *Sarasota County School Board Policies*, *supra* note 4.

³⁰ *Sarasota County School Board Policies*, *supra* note 4.

³¹ Student Publications Review Organizer, *supra* note 7.

³² *Hazelwood*, 484 U.S. at 273.

³³ See Student Publications Review Organizer, *supra* note 7.

³⁴ *Mahanoy Area Sch. Dist. v. B.L.*, 594 U.S. 180, 190 (2021).

³⁵ *Tinker v. Des Moines Indep. Cmty. Sch. Dist.*, 393 U.S. 503, 508 (1969).

³⁶ *Mahanoy*, 594 U.S. at 193.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *N.J. v. Sonnabend*, 37 F.4th 412, 426 (7th Cir. 2022).

³⁹ See Student Publications Review Organizer, *supra* note 7.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

activities,”⁴¹ there is no evidence previous coverage of much larger walkouts caused such disruptions.⁴² Covert’s claim is thus unreasonable and cannot justify censorship.

That is in significant part because Covert’s decision seems to hinge on the articles’ viewpoints—in violation of school board policy⁴³ and the school’s First Amendment obligations.⁴⁴ Although the *Torch* previously published other stories about politics, voting, or walkouts, Covert has “select[ed] for disfavored treatment” articles involving topics critical of the school board,⁴⁵ a hallmark of viewpoint discrimination. As the explained by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit, whose decisions bind the County, *Hazelwood* doesn’t give school officials a pass to suppress viewpoints they don’t like.⁴⁶ Further, while school officials may not wish for their student newspaper to cover critiques of the school board, the school district has bound itself to a standard of viewpoint neutrality.⁴⁷ Covert’s decision cannot stand.

III. Conclusion

District policy prohibits Principal Covert from rejecting articles based on their viewpoints, yet it appears he did exactly that. Covert’s claimed “pedagogical interests” in censoring these pieces do not hold up on close examination. Rather, he precluded publication of these pieces because they brought criticisms of the school board to light.

Given the urgent nature of this matter, we request a substantive response to this letter no later than Monday, February 23, 2026, confirming you will reverse Principal Covert’s decision to reject these *Torch* articles.

Sincerely,



Marie McMullan
Student Press Counsel, Campus Rights Advocacy

Cc: Terry Connor, Sarasota County Schools Superintendent
Stephen Covert, Pine View School Principal

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² See Brown, *supra* note 21; see Chang, *supra* note 21.

⁴³ *Sarasota County School Board Policies*, *supra* note 4.

⁴⁴ See Searcy, 888 F.2d at 1325.

⁴⁵ *Rosenberger v. Rector & Visitors of Univ. of Va.*, 515 U.S. 819, 831 (1995).

⁴⁶ Searcy, 888 F.2d at 1325.

⁴⁷ *Sarasota County School Board Policies*, *supra* note 4.