

LHS students respond to censure

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By Kerri Sandaine of the Tribune

Students get First Amendment lesson after school district blocks Web site

Lewiston High School senior and editor-in-chief of the Bengals Purr Kaylee Brewster and the rest of ...
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Adding a blog to the online version of Lewiston High School's student newspaper seemed like a good way to get some reader input, said members of the Bengal's Purr staff.

Letters to the editor rarely come in, and senior journalism students said they wanted a forum for student comments. Instead, they wound up with a front page story for the Purr and a firsthand First Amendment lesson after the Web site was blocked by the district.

"I learned the First Amendment doesn't necessarily apply to students," said Cody Solders, 17, who designed a new Web site for the student publication after the issue came to a head.

What really irked students was not being notified about the district's decision. The kids showed up for class, tried to log in and found access was denied.

"The thing that astonished us is they didn't tell us," said Leata Torkelson, 17, a cartoon and graphics editor.

"We didn't think it was that big of deal that we wanted to have a blog," said Amanda Blenden, 17, co-managing editor. "We weren't going to post anything bad. We were going to monitor comments."

The blog violated district policies regarding anonymity, said Principal Bob Donaldson. Anonymity is not allowed on the online network, because the district believes individuals must be 100 percent responsible for their words and actions, according to the policy.

"The network policy serves to protect the district and the students who attend the schools within the district," he said. "I don't think the block was personal to the Purr. It was just what (the district) would do regardless of a link out there that didn't meet the standards of the policy."

Web site access was blocked through the district network office, Donaldson said. The network serves about 2,000 teachers and students in the Lewiston School District.

"The issue wasn't an issue of free exchange of information," said Norman Rudy, network systems administrator. "It was an issue of anonymity, which is a district policy. The blog allowed anyone to sign up and get an account and post on that Web site."

The senior journalism students said they don't believe any policy was violated by the online paper. They think it's more of a generational problem, and district officials were unnecessarily wary of the blog.

"We tried to compromise, but they wanted complete control," Solders said. "There was a lot of frustration. It seems like they thought if they just ignored it, it would just go away since we're all

seniors."

The students wrote a letter to Donaldson and the assistant superintendent, Ryan Taylor, explaining why they were upset. They also sat down with administrators to discuss the issue.

"If anything, they were violating their own policy," Blenden said.

The network is supposed to be a "free and open forum for expression," students said.

Donaldson disagrees with the notion the district violated any policies.

The district is in the process of reviewing network policies because a software update is in the works, Taylor said. The current policy was written in 1995.

The newspaper is under the jurisdiction of the school and subject to district policy, as far as the computer network and content are concerned, said Purr adviser Patrick Shannon.

And the Supreme Court has ruled in favor of school districts on some major First Amendment cases, said the journalism instructor.

The Purr staff has created an online edition that isn't linked to the school district's home page. The kids recalled gathering around Solders' desk and cheering when it was launched.

"It's pretty much the most amazing Web site I've ever seen in my life," said Kaylee Brewster, 17, editor in chief.

Overall, the students seem pleased with the outcome.

Torkelson said one of the main reasons the newspaper staff was so concerned about the issue is because they "were worried about how this could affect future students."

"They were not worried about my future," joked Shannon, who has taught journalism for 14 years.

He is covering the cost of the new online server now used by the students for the Bengal's Purr. The \$73 a year comes out of his own pocket and the risk of any legal problems is on him, Shannon said.

The new Web site doesn't have a blog because the kids didn't want the page blocked at school.

"We had to choose our battle," Torkelson said. "We did take this seriously."

Shauni Wemhoff, 17, co-managing editor, said the whole thing really taught them a lot about journalism law and the First Amendment. "We could actually talk with (school officials) and we knew what we were talking about."

Shannon said after this year, the staff will decide how to proceed with the online version. For now, it can be viewed at www.bengalspurr.com.

"I just thought overall this has been a great learning situation for the students," Shannon said. "I was teaching journalism ethics and legalities at the time and I was able to use this as a teachable moment."

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