

Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier / Background ●●●

The First Amendment protects the right to free speech and free press. This means that people have the right to express themselves without interference or punishment from the government. This freedom is one of the fundamental rights at the heart of the U.S. political system. It helps people obtain information, share ideas, make decisions, and communicate those decisions to the government and each other. The First Amendment applies to all levels of government—federal, state, and local. It protects expression of popular and unpopular, even offensive, ideas.

The freedom of speech is not absolute, however. The government can generally limit the time, place, and manner of speech. (For example, a town can require people to obtain a permit to hold a protest march, limit the hours during which loudspeakers may be used, or impose some restrictions on signs). With few exceptions, however, the government cannot limit or punish speech based on what is being said.

The freedom of press protects from government censorship of media (e.g., newspapers, magazines, books, radio, television, and film). This means that the government cannot attempt to censor publications before they are published unless they would 1) cause certain, serious harm and 2) that harm could only be stopped by preventing the publication from being published.

There are some special places where the rules about free speech are different, including prisons, schools, and the military. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that public schools (which are run by the government) can limit speech more than the government can outside of school. Places outside of schools, where First Amendment rights are traditionally exercised, are called “public forums.” Students do have some free speech rights in schools, but student speech can also be limited when it disrupts the learning environment or interferes with rights of others.

In May 1983, students in the Journalism II class at Hazelwood East High School in St. Louis, Missouri, generated the final edition of their school paper, *Spectrum*. As was customary, they submitted the paper to their adviser, Howard Emerson, who was new to the job. He followed the procedures of the recently departed previous adviser by giving the principal, Robert Reynolds, the opportunity to review the paper prior to publication.

When Reynolds reviewed the paper, he found two articles that concerned him. The first article addressed the issue of teen pregnancy, including comments from pregnant students at the school. Although names were not given, Reynolds thought there were enough details in the article to make it easy for other students to determine the identities of the pregnant teens. He was concerned about the privacy of those students. He also noticed that the article mentioned sex and birth control. He did not think that students in ninth grade should be reading about sex and birth control. The second article was about divorce and, like the first article, this one included personal information. In this article, Reynolds was not concerned so much about the students, but, rather, about what they said about their families. For instance, one student whose

parents were divorced made negative comments about her father, claiming that her father was always out with the guys, that he did not spend enough time with his family, and that the father and mother were always arguing. Reynolds was troubled by the fact that the father had not been given a chance to defend himself by responding to his daughter's comments.

Reynolds wanted the students to make changes in their articles, but he was afraid that if they took the time to do so, they would miss the deadline for publishing *Spectrum*. He did not want that to happen, especially because it was the last issue of the year and there would not be another chance to publish the paper. He felt like he had to make a quick decision, so he told Emerson to delete the two pages with the questionable articles and publish the remainder of the paper. He informed his superiors in the school system of this decision; they supported him wholeheartedly.

The students had invested a great deal of time and energy in producing the paper and felt that they had followed proper journalism procedures. If they had been approached about the problems, they may have been able to resolve them. They were upset to find out instead that two pages, which also included non-offensive articles, had been deleted. They felt that this censorship was a direct violation of their First Amendment rights, so they took their case to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri. This court did not agree with the students; the judges said that school officials can impose limits on students' speech in activities that are "an integral part of the school's educational function" as long as their decision "has a substantial and reasonable basis." In other words, the court felt that if the school has a good reason to do so, it could place limits on school activities, such as the publication of the school newspaper.

Unhappy with the outcome, the students appealed their case to the Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit. This court reversed the decision of the lower court, saying that the students' First Amendment rights were violated. In the opinion, the court conceded that the newspaper was indeed a part of the school curriculum but noted that it was also a "public forum." As a public forum, the newspaper was "intended to be and operated as a conduit for student viewpoint." Because the paper was a forum for student discussion, the principal or other officials could censor it only when "necessary to avoid material and substantial interference with schoolwork or discipline ... or the rights of others."

The school appealed the Court of Appeals' decision and the Supreme Court of the United States agreed to hear the case. In determining whether or not students' rights were violated, it would consider whether or not the student newspaper was a public forum and whether the First Amendment "requires a school affirmatively to promote particular student speech."

Questions to Consider

1. Why did the newspaper adviser give the paper to Principal Reynolds for review? Was this standard procedure?
2. What concerns did Principal Reynolds have regarding the two articles? Were these legitimate concerns? Do you think the principal had any options other than deleting entire pages from the student paper?
3. What rights did the students believe had been violated? What is the relevant wording of the First Amendment?
4. Should a principal be able to censor student newspapers? If so, under what conditions?
5. Should a principal or other school authority be able to silence other forms of student speech? If so, under what conditions? How does speech by an individual student differ from speech by the school newspaper?