

INTRODUCTION

Scholastic journalism best serves learners and the school community when students produce free and responsible news media by balancing rights and responsibilities, applying ethical prudence and advancing the best interests of young citizens and the school mission.

The focus of student journalists must always be aimed beyond their self-interests toward doing what is best for society. Their motivation should be driven by service rather than ego gratification.

Another challenge for beginning journalists involves their scope of awareness. As they gain news media experience, their competence improves, their vision broadens and they develop a more panoramic understanding of their craft — including the ethics of journalism. As their insight expands, students become more adept at avoiding errors, misjudgment and other deficiencies caused by inexperience and an undeveloped ethical compass.

Developing a sense of ethics is essential for student journalists, who learn to distinguish right from wrong and good from bad in their work. The power of news media can be used in good or bad ways, and young journalists must be nurtured to develop the self-discipline to choose what's right and good — even when the right choice may cost something in the short run.

The term ethics comes from the Greek word “ethos,” which means character. An ethical person is a person of good character who strives to make “right” choices. Those “right” choices are self-determined by each individual. Ultimately, ethics is voluntary conduct that is self-enforced.

Although ethics is related to law, it differs from law in that law is socially determined and socially enforced. Law tells us what we can do; ethics, what we should do. What is legal may not be what is ethical. Having the right to say something doesn't make it right to say it.

Ethical choices often are not easy. Dilemmas occur when two “right” moral obligations conflict. For example, suppose a yearbook staff member lies to the editor about why she needs an extension on an important deadline. The editor comes to you, the staff member's friend, seeking confirmation of the excuse that was given. Two moral virtues collide: loyalty to a friend and commitment to truth. It is time to weigh your values.

News media policy manuals may provide consequences for staff members who flagrantly violate the standards of ethical conduct, but a note of caution is in order. People of good intentions can disagree about ethical standards—what constitutes fair and balanced coverage, accuracy, invasion of privacy, truth and

other components of an ethical code. Those who measure news media integrity must be careful not to impose their interpretation of an ethical principle as the one and only “right” interpretation.

In schools that practice democratic education, students have choices. Some choices may lack ethical integrity, betray the spirit of the First Amendment and fall at the very far edge of a protected freedom.

In such a case, the temptation to narrow that freedom may be great. But the temptation must be resisted.

A line will always exist between behavior protected by law and behavior that is not. If we reduce the distance to that line each time free speech is challenged, our freedoms will perpetually erode.

The challenge for educators is to inspire students to be intrinsically motivated to abide by the highest standards of ethical conduct. That goal is best accomplished when school authorities focus more on mentoring than on clout, more on collaboration than on autocratic decision-making.

The NSIPA Code of Ethics for High School Journalists was created to help guide students in the direction of responsible journalism. This model code may be adopted without change or modified to meet the particular needs of a news staff.

A code of ethics should be a primary reference source for student journalists. It should be part of the curriculum and readily available not only to media staffs but also to those served by news media and those who oversee production.

Reputable conduct by student journalists helps secure the public trust and news media credibility. A code of ethics serves as the foundation for free and responsible student media.

SEVEN KEY ETHICS POINTS

- 1 BE RESPONSIBLE.
- 2 BE FAIR.
- 3 BE HONEST.
- 4 BE ACCURATE.
- 5 BE INDEPENDENT.
- 6 MINIMIZE HARM.
- 7 BE ACCOUNTABLE.