

Public Abstract

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Title:Trained to censor? A study of student expression issues in Missouri principal preparation programs

With the abundance of censorship conflicts in America's public schools, principals are frequently under fire for silencing student voices. Yet very little is known about why administrators react as they do. This study looks specifically at the training they receive in the area of student expression law and the First Amendment.

The researcher focused the study on the state of Missouri, which has 17 training programs for future principals. Relevant course syllabi were analyzed, and six school law professors were interviewed in detail about student expression topics and how those issues are addressed in their courses. In addition, the researcher conducted a survey of Missouri's public high school principals to gauge their attitudes and knowledge about the First Amendment and their graduate-level training.

The results indicate that student expression issues represent a small component of principal preparation -- usually one part of one class session in a school law course. These survey courses might best be described as "a mile wide and an inch deep," providing little detail on the relevant legal standards. In particular, issues involving student media were oversimplified or presented in a factually inaccurate way in some cases. The survey results showed no relationship between how principals rated their training and how well versed they were in student expression law.

Suggestions are provided for improving the situation, including adding school law to the undergraduate curriculum, promoting collaboration with journalism departments, and focusing the courses on objective legal standards rather than personal stories from instructors.