

How free is speech in schools?

Just last month, a group of student journalists from Virginia and their advisers visited the Virginia Capitol Building to fight for their right to say whatever they want in their respective newspapers.

With the help of V.A. delegate Chris Hurst, they brought attention to HB2382.

“We were trying to ensure that student journalists have the freedom to determine the content that they are publishing,” English teacher and student newspaper adviser at TJHSST Erinn Harris said.

In Virginia, censorship from school principals and administration has sometimes been a problem.

This issue has been brought up in the courts multiple times, but in the *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier (1988)*, the Supreme Court decided that school principals can reserve the right to censor their students’ newspaper.

Since then, multiple schools in the state, both public schools and universities, have censored stories from students.

Many have even adopted a policy making principals the editors of newspapers.

In March 2015, the principal of Fauquier High School prohibited the publication of a story on dabbing, another way to smoke marijuana.

While this may seem like a non issue, it is frustrating to see school administration try to stifle students’ opinions.

In fact, it can be considered unconstitutional. The fact that

it's a school setting should not hinder people's rights.

"These types of issues are why we went down there," Harris said. "We wanted to ensure that all student journalists in Virginia have their first amendment rights and it is not just based on what county or school district your parents sent you to school."

The bill did not make its way out of committee, and did not advance any further.

At AHS, this issue has never been a problem.

"For us, I do not think this has never been a problem. We do not really get censored, and the administration does not really care about what we say," senior and newspaper editor Yabi Bereket said.

Still, sometimes teachers do get offended by what is put in the newspaper.

"I have seen teachers come up to students that have written a story about something related to them because they are mad, and sometimes even try to get stories removed," Bereket said.

But none of this has ever really come to fruition.

Still, this begs the question: what other rights do students have and are they protected at AHS?

The outline of a student's rights in a public school setting all began in Des Moines, IA in 1965.

Five students, whose parents had a background in civil rights activism, decided to wear black bands on their arms to make a statement about the injustices of the Vietnam War.

Once the school administrators heard about the mini-protest, they decided to make a regulation stating that any middle and high students seen with the arm band would be suspended.

Three of those students – John Tinker, his sister Mary Beth, and their friend Christopher Eckhardt – were suspended upon their arrival on campus.

Despite this small roadblock, these teens were able to make a change when it came to the application of the First Amendment in schools.

Four years later, the Supreme Court determined that students have the rights to freely express themselves in public schools, as long as it does not cause any disruptions.

But as students become more aware of social issues and become more open about sharing their beliefs, it is time to ask: is this right upheld justly at our school?

Before one even begins to answer the question, it is important to know one thing: in what manners does the court mean when it says that students can freely “express themselves?”

According to the ACLU, students should not be prohibited in what they wear, what they say, what they write, and how they choose to behave, as long as they are not disruptive.

Looking at that list, one factor stands out: the fact that we can express ourselves through clothing.

The FCPS Student Rights and Responsibility has a long list of clothing and accessories that cannot be worn during the school day, such as hats, tank tops, skirts of certain lengths, spiked belts, and clothing with drug paraphernalia and gang promotion.

While some of these restrictions may seem unfair, the courts have recognized that school administrators need to maintain an environment that is safe for all students.

Administrators are charged with minimizing disruption in the school day as much as possible.

That's why they try to limit sexually provocative and criminally related clothing.

When that is considered, it makes perfect sense that clothing that features a marijuana leaf or a gang sign would be prohibited, but it may not be as easy to understand when it comes to clothing.

When it comes to what we say and write at school, there are not many restrictions.

"I feel like generally, most teachers allow us to express ourselves through words in any way we want to," junior Abby Kitila said.

However, many students have gotten in trouble for using curse words.

The forbiddance of curse words in arguments or bullying is just, as a fight would distract other students in the room.

But nowadays, people – teens and adults – use terms that would be deemed 'inappropriate' by some in regular conversation.

It is just the way people talk nowadays, and it is not meant to harm anyone.

Still, many people get called out by teachers, and sometimes even receive referrals, for tossing around these words.

While minor, this can also be viewed by some as a violation of student's rights.

The last right given to students is the ability to express ourselves through our actions.

For the most part, AHS is a model to look up to when it comes to this.

To examine this point, one just needs to recall the on-campus march against President Donald Trump's election in Nov. of

2016.

Or more recently, the March for Our Lives Protest that was held on campus in March of last year,

Hundreds of students walked out in the middle of class, posters in hand, to walk around the stadium in support of gun reform.

None of the teachers restricted the students from leaving. Some even encouraged involvement.

The administration did not punish any students who participated, but went outside with students to make sure it was safe.

For this, the administration should be commended.

This type of behavior is exactly what the ruling of *Tinker v. Des Moines (1969)* encouraged: student expression without school restriction.

All in all, while there are a few unfair limitations placed on our expression at AHS, it is safe to say that our rights are respected most of the time, and at a further extent than at other schools.