

4. No News Is Good News

All copies of the January 30, 2009 issue of the Stevenson High School (Lincolnshire, IL) *Statesman* disappeared as soon as they were set out, leaving students without their newspaper. The *Statesman* has a reputation for addressing difficult subjects that high school students are concerned or curious about, such as teen suicide and oral sex. It has won numerous journalistic awards, including the Press Association Pacemaker Award, considered to be the Pulitzer Prize of high school newspapers. The January 30, 2009 issue contained three stories and four sidebars about “hooking up,” a term used by teens for casual sex.

Stevenson High School administrators denied responsibility for the disappearance of the newspapers. Their denials were met with skepticism in some quarters, however. Immediately after making the denials the administration vociferously denounced the stories and sidebars on hooking up. They said the topic lacked newsworthiness and that the *Statesman*’s treatment of it failed to include counterbalancing perspectives to the message that one night stands are typical among high school students. The administrators accused the *Statesman* of having recklessly disregarded the privacy rights of students whose first names and graduation years were indicated in the stories and sidebars. Shortly thereafter the administration instituted a policy of increased oversight of the *Statesman*. A spokesman, citing the administration’s ultimate responsibility for the content of the taxpayer-funded newspaper, called the policy revision a curriculum decision to assure balance, fairness, and accuracy in a student activity that is fundamentally a learning experience.

Following these decisions twenty parents attended a school board meeting. Most decried the removal of the newspapers and the new administration policy, expressing concerns about censorship and contending that the *Statesman* provides information about behavior that gets kids talking about issues of consequence that affect them. Several parents, however, voiced support for the administration, complaining that the “Hooking Up” issue was sensationalism, not journalism.

In the case of *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier* 484 U.S. 260 (1988) the U.S. Supreme Court considered the question of how the first amendment rights of freedom of speech and freedom of the press apply to public high school newspapers. The Supreme Court held in this case (by a vote of 6-3) that school officials may impose reasonable restrictions upon the expression of students, teachers, and other members of the school community in school newspapers.