

Is It Good for the Kids?

Safeguarding First Amendment Freedoms

By Gene R. Carter, Executive Director, ASCD

Many high school respondents to a recent survey not only did not know their First Amendment rights, but, when they were told the text of the law, more than one-third also said it went too far.

But that's not the only disturbing news from the *Future of the First Amendment: What American High School Students Think*

About Their Freedoms study. Only half the high school students surveyed believed newspapers should be allowed to publish freely without government approval of stories. Many erroneously believed flag burning is illegal and the government can censor the Internet. And, overall, students were less likely than adults to think people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions.

The study, conducted by researchers at the University of Connecticut with support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, found that many American students do not understand and appreciate freedom of the press, religion, speech, petition, and assembly. Although these freedoms are guaranteed by the First Amendment, they will continue to exist only as long as all Americans take responsibility for exercising and protecting them for every citizen.

If students do not believe, as the study indicates, that they have the right to express an unpopular opinion or publish a news story, they will not guard these rights when challenged. If students take these rights for granted—particularly high school students who will soon be adult members of our

democratic society—the future of these rights is in jeopardy.

But there is hope. The study found that students who have taken classes on the First Amendment and participated in the school newspaper or another media-related activity are more likely to know and appreciate their First Amendment freedoms. Our

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schools can make a difference by providing students firsthand experience of the rights that are the foundation of American society—in fact, many schools are already doing so.

Students in First Amendment Schools not only study history, civics, and democracy, they also actively experience the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. At ASCD, we have been working with the First Amendment Center for more than three years to give students that experience. Since 2001, the First Amendment Schools project has brought together and supported more than 55 schools committed to engaging students in the complex process of becoming democratic citizens. In schools across the country, these students volunteer, research, and write letters on a variety of issues; host community meetings; register voters; serve on their school senate; and help make decisions that affect their lives—from decisions about the dress code to making their school safer.

When Butler Middle School became a First Amendment School in 2002, only 26 percent of 9th graders agreed with the statement, "Students help make the goals and rules at my school." Within a year, and based largely on the estab-



lishment of the Butler Student Senate, that figure had jumped to 69 percent. The representative senate is not only involved in developing rules and goals but also in problem solving and day-to-day decision making. Based on the needs identified by their constituents and research they conducted within the district, the student senators developed a breakfast program at Butler that is now being replicated at other middle schools in the area.

At ASCD, we believe this participation in decision making is one of the most important experiences we can give students. By practicing democracy, students confront the challenges of self-government, including the difficult task of balancing a commitment to individual rights with a concern for the common good.

Students who have an opportunity to exercise leadership, negotiate differences, and propose solutions to shared problems gain invaluable experience practicing the skills that are essential to thoughtful and effective participation in civic life. Providing these experiences is vital to the growth and success of both our students and our democratic society.

More information about the *First Amendment and the First Amendment Schools* project is available at <http://www.firstamendmentschools.org>.

The study, *Future of the First Amendment: What American High School Students Think About Their Freedoms*, is available at <http://firstamendment.ideas.org>.

