

Grades 9-12

3rd Place

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9th Grade

Speech is a Student's Superpower

Words can be spent abundantly and with disregard until those words are challenged by higher authority. As students, we like to spread our truth without thinking of the consequences it will have on others. There are limitations to students' speech to protect their peers from any collateral damage done by what the students share. In the *Hazelwood vs. Kuhlmeier* case, a group of students wrote articles that would be funded by the school and distributed throughout school hours. The school principal required that he approve of the newspaper before it was published to the public school. He came across two articles about divorce and teen pregnancy that could potentially put parents or students in an uncomfortable situation, so he decided to scrap the passages. The students were enraged with the decision to take out their writing that they spent hours creating. *Spectrum*, the student-led newspaper, had many staff members that believed the removal of the articles disrupted their First Amendment rights; upon this suspicion, they sued the school. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the school district due to the school funding and legitimate concerns for the students. This case is a prime example of why words must wisely and cautiously be spent.

Understanding how words can affect the community is a concept that many students might not grasp in their lifetime. Before expanding my knowledge on students' rights of speech, I believed that students were not allowed to express their opinions at school. This case gifted me with a deep apprehension on how I am protected, or must be confronted, in a school setting. During 8th grade EAST class, my partners and I were researching ideas that could help the school district. We ultimately decided on a student resource website that provided aid for a variety of subjects. When our project was declined, we began asking ourselves the question: Why did the school always reject our student-led projects? Until now, I thought it was just out of

spite against students, but now I understand the staff had legitimate reasons for declining our project. The website was planned to be open for students to share their needs for tutoring, extra study time, etc. This could have been a potential place for cyber bullying towards our peers. Justin Byron White, a respected justice, stated that, "Educators did not offend the First Amendment by exercising editorial control over the content of student speech so long as their actions were "reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns." The Hazelwood School District was also funding *The Spectrum*, which gives the school the power to set boundaries and limits to the writing. With the evidence before the jury, "The Court held that schools must be able to set high standards for student speech disseminated under their auspices, and that schools retained the right to refuse to sponsor speech that was "inconsistent with 'the shared values of a civilized social order.'" Students' speech is protected yet still challenged in situations that could become damaging to the learners.

Each word that is written or spoken has a purpose towards others lives. The simple phrase of, "I disagree" changed the future of many students. When the Supreme Court disagreed with *Spectrum* newspaper in a 5-3 decision, it gave schools more authority over students' speech. My own rights were put in jeopardy when this life-altering decision was made. My writing could be erased with the simple push of a delete button. Time, dedication, and sleepless nights scraped under a rug with a simple movement. I believe that students' writing and opinions are powerful enough to change the world. We might be young, but our points of view need to be heard and considered. Schools can have structure over their students, but the students themselves must also have power over what happens to their expression of speech. The court ruled with the school that day, but students' words will still continue to make the world anew.

I partially agree with the Supreme Court's ultimate ruling, as I also believe the articles put students into potentially threatening situations. However, giving the school power to completely demolish a student's hard work is detrimental to a learner's view on their educational environment. In my opinion, the principal shouldn't have been allowed to delete all of *Spectrum's* writing. Instead, he only should have been given the right to revise and make editorial changes to the article for the students' well-being. Eventually, he should have conversed with *Spectrum* to confirm that the corrections met their standards. Personally, I don't agree with the decision to give the schools the editorial freedom to throw pieces of art into the void. Words are powerful no matter the person that shares them. Phrases shall never be erased from existence, only changed upon threat to others.

Works Cited

Bill of Rights Institute. "Documents to Examine- A-K. Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier (1988)." *Bill of Rights Institute*, <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/activities/documents-to-examine-a-k-hazelwood-v-kuhlmeier-1988>.