**Censoring school publications robs students of their constitutional rights**

Last year at Overland High School, the principal came into the student publication room and demanded that they stop the presses.

A story about a student death following a routine sports injury included statements from a coroner’s report that found the school negligent. The principal also threatened to pull the teacher and the funding.

The students called a lawyer.

Last month when administrators at Stanley Lake High School asked to approve student newspaper articles before they went to print, the students asked for a lawyer.

The principal at Stanley Lake did not want the students to run a story about racial tensions at the school.

Across the state, high school officials request prior review and exercise prior restraint of student publications when they see content that may paint their school in a negative light. They panic.

When they see stories that expose the schools less than stellar qualities, they panic. When they panic, they censor.

Censorship always loses.

Student journalists in Colorado enjoy the protection of the Colorado Student Free Expression Law. Adopted in 1990, the law requires public school districts to create policies that support a free student press.

That’s right. In Colorado student publications operate as an independent open forum. So the censorship is not just irresponsible: it is against the law.

The 1969 Supreme Court decision Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District concluded that students do not “shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.”

Scholastic journalists should not fear punishment because their opinions may be unpopular or their newsgathering may uncover an ugly truth.

What are we saying to a young person when their first forms of public and independent expression are ripped from their hands and thrown on the cutting room floor?

We have a responsibility to help students become responsible citizens and civic leaders.

When school officials censor, students must fight for their rights.

At Stanley Lake and at Overland, they did. Then the local media picked up the stories, but they were no longer about racism or a student death; they were about censorship.

The principals backpedaled and yielded under the state law. They were left with negative press about their school, which is exactly what they were trying to avoid.

Censorship will always lose. It is always wrong. When it happens in education, a place where the values and rights of our democratic society should be learned and fostered, it’s appalling.