

February 17, 2026

Dr. Megan Greene  
Chief of Secondary Education  
Sarasota County Schools  
1960 Landings Blvd.  
Sarasota, Florida 34231

**URGENT**

*Sent via Next Day Delivery and Electronic Mail (megan.green@sarasotacountyschools.net)*

Dear Dr. Greene:

The Student Press Freedom Initiative at FIRE<sup>1</sup> is concerned by Principal Stephen Covert's decision to withhold two articles from publication in *The Torch*,<sup>2</sup> Pine View School's student newspaper.<sup>3</sup> Such administrative actions must conform with Sarasota County School Board's policies, which require decisions to reject content from student publications to be "viewpoint neutral and guided only by the legitimate pedagogical interests of the school[.]"<sup>4</sup> However, it appears the claimed "pedagogical interests" in pulling the pieces from publication are, at best, based on a significant misunderstanding and, at worst, fabricated to cover for viewpoint discrimination—but in either case, the result is improperly silencing the student press at Pine View School. We urge you to reverse Covert's decision and allow *The Torch* to publish these pieces.

**I. Pine View School Administrator Pulls Two Student Articles Critical of the School Board from *The Torch***

*The Torch* is the student-run newspaper for ninth through twelfth grade students at Pine View School.<sup>5</sup> While the Sarasota County School District policy vests editorial control of student

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<sup>1</sup> The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) is a nonpartisan nonprofit dedicated to defending freedom of expression. FIRE's Student Press Freedom Initiative (SPFI) advocates for the rights of student journalists across the country. You can learn more about our mission and activities at [fire.org](http://fire.org).

<sup>2</sup> Chloe Nelson, *CENSORED? Students say they were silenced by Pine View principal*, VENICE GONDOLIER SUN (Feb. 9, 2026), [https://www.yoursun.com/venice/news/censored-students-say-they-were-silenced-by-pine-view-principal/article\\_521100c8-3df5-4f92-8f95-5dec6fc92940.html](https://www.yoursun.com/venice/news/censored-students-say-they-were-silenced-by-pine-view-principal/article_521100c8-3df5-4f92-8f95-5dec6fc92940.html).

<sup>3</sup> *ABOUT US*, THE TORCH, <https://www.pvtorch.com/about-us/> (last visited Feb. 13, 2026).

<sup>4</sup> *Sarasota County School Board Policies*, Section 4.51 Student Publications, <https://5il.co/2fjwu> [<https://perma.cc/NT7U-9NY9>].

<sup>5</sup> THE TORCH WEB, *supra* note 3.

newspapers with principals, decisions to remove content must be “viewpoint neutral and guided only by the legitimate pedagogical interests of the school, not a mere disagreement with the opinions expressed.”<sup>6</sup> Principals may reject certain prohibited content, such as that which is “reasonably likely to cause material and substantial disruption to school activities.”<sup>7</sup> Sarasota County School Board policy permits student journalists to appeal decisions to reject content to the District Level Chief.<sup>8</sup> The school board added the right to appeal last October, after students voiced concerns about excessive oversight from administration.<sup>9</sup>

On January 28, *The Torch* staff learned Principal Covert was holding two student articles under review: Alex Lieberman’s coverage of student opposition to a school board resolution for the district to comply with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement operations, and Ava Lenerz’s opinion piece criticizing the board’s decision to move its meeting time.<sup>10</sup> Students involved told the *Venice Gondolier* that Covert initially did not give a reason for preventing publication of these pieces.<sup>11</sup>

On February 6, Covert delivered to the student journalists a packet he said was generated by artificial intelligence that listed the “pedagogical” reasons he rejected their stories.<sup>12</sup> This AI-generated report accused the student of being biased against the school board and included inaccuracies about how many school board quotes the articles included.<sup>13</sup> These students also reported that Covert called them “impetuous” and “impatient” for notifying the *Gondolier* after he initially withheld their pieces.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the AI-generated feedback, Covert filled out a “Student Publications Review Organizer” to further justify his decision to reject the pieces.<sup>15</sup> In this file, he claimed Lenerz’s opinion piece was “inconsistent with pedagogical interests of the school” because it contained “strong criticism of the school board,” “political dissent or activism,” “voting behavior,” “opposition to elected officials,” and a graphic of a vote box and an F-grade.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Sarasota County School Board Policies*, *supra* note 4.

<sup>7</sup> Student Publications Review Organizer (Feb. 2, 2026) (on file with author).

<sup>8</sup> *Sarasota County School Board Policies*, *supra* note 4.

<sup>9</sup> Nelson, *supra* note 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* See Alex Lieberman, *Students stand resolute on recent resolution*, THE TORCH (on file with author); see Ava Lenerz, *School Board not serving students*, THE TORCH (on file with author).

<sup>11</sup> Nelson, *supra* note 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> Artificial intelligence article review (on file with author). For instance, the AI-generated report claims the coverage of the school district’s resolution to comply with ICE had “source selection bias,” with “nearly all quoted voices” being students in opposition to the board action, while board members were “absent or minimal” and had “no substantive board voice.” However, the piece contained a significant number of direct quotes from Sarasota County School Board Chari Bridget Ziegler, who proposed the resolution. See Lieberman, *supra* note 10.

<sup>14</sup> Nelson, *supra* note 2.

<sup>15</sup> Student Publications Review Organizer, *supra* note 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

As for Lieberman's news article, Covert hinged his reasoning on the piece not being consistent with pedagogical school interests because it "only includes student voices opposing the resolution and presents no documented attempts to interview or include students who support the resolution."<sup>17</sup> However, Lieberman quoted the school board member who introduced the resolution at length.<sup>18</sup> Covert additionally flagged the piece as "reasonably likely to cause material and substantial disruption to school activities"<sup>19</sup> because it covered a walkout, stating such coverage "could be interpreted as encouraging future disruption to school activities/schedule and violations of the student code of conduct."<sup>20</sup>

Notably, *The Torch* has covered school walkouts,<sup>21</sup> voting,<sup>22</sup> and opposition to elected officials<sup>23</sup> multiple times in recent years. The difference between those stories and the two articles at issue here is the prior ones weren't critical of the school board, and thus were not censored.

## II. **Principal Covert Withheld Articles Based on Viewpoints In Violation of School District Policy.**

Principal Covert's decision to bar *The Torch* from running Lenerz's and Lieberman's articles warrants reversal as it violates district policy and makes a mockery of student press rights in the Sarasota County School District. While *The Torch* is subject to prior review by the principal—and the removal of prohibited content—the Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit has explained school officials cannot silence speech based on viewpoint.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, school district policy requires viewpoint neutrality in all such content decisions, and for such decisions to be guided only by the school's legitimate pedagogical interests.<sup>25</sup>

This policy echoes language from the standard the Supreme Court established in *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier*.<sup>26</sup> Under that standard, where a publication bears the imprimatur of the school, is

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<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> Lieberman, *supra* note 10.

<sup>19</sup> Student Publications Review Organizer, *supra* note 7.

<sup>20</sup> Student Publications Review Organizer, *supra* note 7.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Suzanne Brown, *Students Take Part in Nationwide Walkout*, THE TORCH (March 20, 2018), <https://www.pvtorch.com/2018/03/20/students-take-part-in-countrywide-walkout/>; Felicity Chang, *Students Partake in Statewide Walkout Against 'Don't Say gay' Bill*, THE TORCH (March 10, 2022), <https://www.pvtorch.com/2022/03/10/students-partake-in-statewide-walkout-against-dont-say-gay-bill/>.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Lily Quartermaine, *How Can You Register To Vote?*, THE TORCH (Sept. 30, 2020), <https://www.pvtorch.com/2020/09/30/how-can-you-register-to-vote/> (directly calling on students to vote in the 2020 presidential election); Andrew Ashby, *A Minor Representation Issue*, THE TORCH (Oct. 23, 2025), <https://www.pvtorch.com/2025/10/23/a-minor-representation-issue/> (opinion piece advocating for the voting age to be lowered to 16 years old).

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Peyton Harris, *Opinion: The First Presidential Debate Was Embarrassing*, THE TORCH (Oct. 5, 2020), <https://www.pvtorch.com/2020/10/05/opinion-the-first-presidential-debate-was-embarrassing/>.

<sup>24</sup> See *Searcy v. Harris*, 888 F.2d 1314, 1325 (11th Cir. 1989) ("Although *Hazelwood* provides reasons for allowing a school official to discriminate based on *content*, we do not believe it offers any justification for allowing educators to discriminate based on viewpoint.").

<sup>25</sup> *Sarasota County School Board Policies*, *supra* note 4.

<sup>26</sup> 484 U.S. 260 (1988).

produced as a classroom activity, and is not dedicated as a “forum for student expression,” the school may regulate its content for “legitimate pedagogical purposes.”<sup>27</sup> But under Eleventh Circuit precedent<sup>28</sup> and school board policy,<sup>29</sup> administrators also must adhere to viewpoint neutrality with respect to those choices.<sup>30</sup>

Principal Covert’s decision fails under these prongs. First, his intent in prohibiting publication of these pieces appears connected not to a reasonable educational lesson he hopes to teach journalism students, or concerns for access to education by other students, but rather an effort to stifle criticisms of the school board, political dissent, and “voting behavior” by students.<sup>31</sup> If “the Nation’s youth is primarily the responsibility of parents, teachers, and state and local school officials,”<sup>32</sup> those youth—including Pine View School students under the responsibility of Principal Covert—will suffer handicaps as they enter the adult realm of civic engagement if they cannot *even read about* “voting behavior” in their high school newspaper.<sup>33</sup> As “America’s public schools are the nurseries of democracy,”<sup>34</sup> Principal Covert cannot couch rejection of these pieces on the fact that they dare mention such basic foundations of democracy as political dissent or voting.

Moreover, “substantial disruption” under the law requires more than “undifferentiated fear or apprehension of disturbance,”<sup>35</sup> and is a “demanding standard.”<sup>36</sup> For instance, the mere fact that a student’s opinion offends or upsets others cannot constitute substantial disruption,<sup>37</sup> as there is no “generalized ‘hurt feelings’ defense” to a public school’s restriction of student speech.<sup>38</sup> None of the content at issue is reasonably likely to cause a material disruption to school activities, which Covert cited as a justification for rejecting Lieberman’s coverage of the ICE compliance resolution,<sup>39</sup> characterizing it as “prohibited content” under school board policy.<sup>40</sup> Contrary to Covert’s assertion that students may interpret a news article that mentions a “relatively small” student walkout as “encouraging future disruption to school

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<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 273.

<sup>28</sup> *Searcy*, 888 F.2d at 1325.

<sup>29</sup> *Sarasota County School Board Policies*, *supra* note 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Sarasota County School Board Policies*, *supra* note 4.

<sup>31</sup> Student Publications Review Organizer, *supra* note 7.

<sup>32</sup> *Hazelwood*, 484 U.S. at 273.

<sup>33</sup> See Student Publications Review Organizer, *supra* note 7.

<sup>34</sup> *Mahanoy Area Sch. Dist. v. B.L.*, 594 U.S. 180, 190 (2021).

<sup>35</sup> *Tinker v. Des Moines Indep. Cnty. Sch. Dist.*, 393 U.S. 503, 508 (1969).

<sup>36</sup> *Mahanoy*, 594 U.S. at 193.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.*

<sup>38</sup> *N.J. v. Sonnabend*, 37 F.4th 412, 426 (7th Cir. 2022).

<sup>39</sup> See Student Publications Review Organizer, *supra* note 7.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.*

activities,”<sup>41</sup> there is no evidence previous coverage of much larger walkouts caused such disruptions.<sup>42</sup> Covert’s claim is thus unreasonable and cannot justify censorship.

That is in significant part because Covert’s decision seems to hinge on the articles’ viewpoints—in violation of school board policy<sup>43</sup> and the school’s First Amendment obligations.<sup>44</sup> Although the *Torch* previously published other stories about politics, voting, or walkouts, Covert has “select[ed] for disfavored treatment” articles involving topics critical of the school board,<sup>45</sup> a hallmark of viewpoint discrimination. As the explained by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit, whose decisions bind the County, *Hazelwood* doesn’t give school officials a pass to suppress viewpoints they don’t like.<sup>46</sup> Further, while school officials may not wish for their student newspaper to cover critiques of the school board, the school district has bound itself to a standard of viewpoint neutrality.<sup>47</sup> Covert’s decision cannot stand.

### III. Conclusion

District policy prohibits Principal Covert from rejecting articles based on their viewpoints, yet it appears he did exactly that. Covert’s claimed “pedagogical interests” in censoring these pieces do not hold up on close examination. Rather, he precluded publication of these pieces because they brought criticisms of the school board to light.

Given the urgent nature of this matter, we request a substantive response to this letter no later than Monday, February 23, 2026, confirming you will reverse Principal Covert’s decision to reject these *Torch* articles.

Sincerely,



Marie McMullan  
Student Press Counsel, Campus Rights Advocacy

Cc: Terry Connor, Sarasota County Schools Superintendent  
Stephen Covert, Pine View School Principal

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<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> See Brown, *supra* note 21; see Chang, *supra* note 21.

<sup>43</sup> Sarasota County School Board Policies, *supra* note 4.

<sup>44</sup> See Searcy, 888 F.2d at 1325.

<sup>45</sup> *Rosenberger v. Rector & Visitors of Univ. of Va.*, 515 U.S. 819, 831 (1995).

<sup>46</sup> Searcy, 888 F.2d at 1325.

<sup>47</sup> Sarasota County School Board Policies, *supra* note 4.