

Ready-made guiding light

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The National Scholastic Press Association's new Model Code of Ethics has made it easier to include an ethics code in staff manuals.

Teaching students under the age of 18 right from wrong is hard enough. But teaching them to navigate the gray areas in between while being responsible journalists can be daunting.

That is why NSPA's board of directors decided a Model Code of Ethics needed to be created specifically for high school and middle school students who are on media staffs, said Logan Aimone, executive director of NSPA. The Associated Collegiate Press, NSPA's sister organization for college students, has had a code for a number of years.

Aimone asked Randy Swikle to craft the document. Swikle, a retired, award-winning publications adviser, is noted for his work on scholastic press rights, laws and ethics and is a member of the JEA Press Rights Commission. Swikle reviewed several ethics codes and books, plus sought input from advisers and others as he developed the document with its seven principles (see box).

"I didn't create it in the sense that it's full of creative ideas. What I did was edit a code that I think will serve student journalists and school journalism programs," Swikle said.

It is called a model code to suggest to staffs that they review and discuss it and determine whether they need to make any adjustments to it, Aimone said.

"The code for a Christian school might be different than the code for a middle school or a public high school," Aimone said. "We have to have a little scaffolding for students."

While this code has similarities to other codes, the NSPA code includes points about respectable behavior toward work and fellow classmates and teachers, and examples to emphasize points. In an example about news value and restraint, a situation is given about a spontaneous, three-person demonstration in the cafeteria at lunch protesting the suspension of a friend. In this example, Aimone said the code helps students think in terms of ethics, not just coverage.

Student journalists need to consider whether coverage of a small topic like one suspension would provoke a bigger protest in the cafeteria.

Swikle said while it is good to have a code for measuring what is good and right, in the end, ethics are self-legislative and self-enforced. That is why students need to be taught and mentored so they develop an intrinsic motivation to do what is right, and administrators need to trust students to do what is right.

"I believe a strong sense of ethics is one of the best proactive strategies in dealing with school administrators who may not trust the competence of students to handle the responsibility of a free student press," Swikle said.

In fact, Swikle tells staffs that when an administrator finds offense in an article, they should have the administrator look through the ethics code and point to the aspect that students have violated.

“Staffs should give the code to administrators to check students on their moral direction,” he said.

But Swikle added that administrators need to start trusting students to do the right thing.