

FIRST PERSON

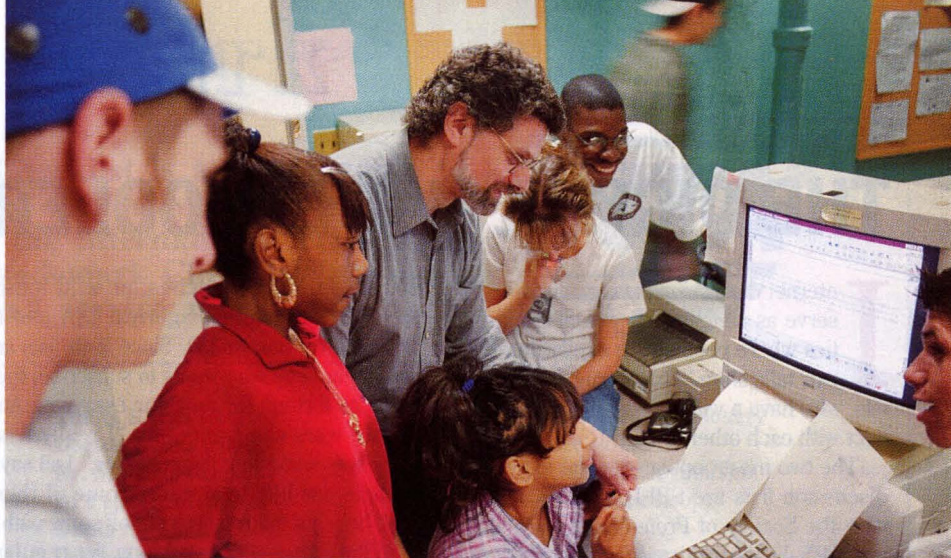
TOUGH SCHOOL, FREE PRESS

Four years ago Leslie Seifert, an opinion page editor for *Newsday* and an adjunct professor at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, approached the staff of a New York City high school for kids in danger of becoming dropouts, and proposed starting a school newspaper — one that would be free from censorship by the principal and staff. Could such a paper hold the school accountable without undermining teachers' authority or provoking unrest? Could a newspaper that took student concerns seriously help students take school seriously? Here's what Seifert has learned.

I needed to assure the principal and her staff that I would not create a newspaper for Middle College High School that was bent on destroying the institution's very fabric. The 500-student school, based at LaGuardia Community College in an industrial section of Long Island, rescues potential dropouts with guidance counselors who cuddle, homerooms called "house," and relatively little homework. Everyone is on a first-name basis. Attendance is a highly unpredictable event.

The faculty feared the arrival of a big, new, prosecutorial voice beyond its control. "Are you going to run a top-ten list of the worst teachers?" a young social studies teacher asked at one of our first meetings. "It's not my style of journalism," I said, "but if students bring it up, we would have to discuss it."

My idea was to publish a school newspaper that students would write, that I would edit, that the school would fund, and that the principal and teachers would see only after it hit the hallways. The newspaper's relationship to the principal and faculty would mirror that of an independent daily to the local mayor and his administration. There would be no censorship. Anyone who found an article inappropriate was welcome to respond in writing or stage protests. No one was required to grant interviews or supply information.



Leslie Seifert and his young staff on deadline at *The Middle College High School News*

I knew of no high school newspaper published under such an arrangement. The U.S. Supreme Court (in *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*, 1988) sanctions school newspaper censorship for reasons "reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns," and principals and superintendents freely indulge in the privilege.

"Honest, uncensored journalism," I told the school staff, "might bring kids to school, make them feel involved, connect them to writing, give them a voice." The faculty remained edgy, but the principal, Cecilia Cunningham, still a risk-taker after thirteen years on the job, was willing to gamble.

Four years later, *The Middle College High School News* remains uncensored. Articles have led to concrete changes: the redesign of a disagreeable cafeteria space, repairs to ceilings and walls, the revival of a moribund boys' basketball team and several clubs, and promises of a cheerleading squad. The newspaper reported on a graffiti problem inside a diner next door and the vandalism stopped. School dances, which frequently were canceled because of insufficient ticket sales and poor planning, now usually succeed, the organizers having been shamed by reports on their past failures.

A typical monthly issue, between ten and twenty pages, also covers sex (MOST STUDENTS GET CONDOMS FROM OUTSIDE SCHOOL), drugs (WHAT IS IT LIKE TO QUIT WEED?), and relationships (WHY DO SO MANY GIRLS PREFER OLDER MEN?). The paper has documented in surveys how many students use marijuana and cigarettes, and what students don't know about sexually transmitted diseases. Each issue also carries a page of *Secret Crushes* (TO TOMMY: CUTIE, I WANT YOU

AND I WANT YOU BAD BABY. BE AT THE LUNCHROOM THIRD PERIOD).

When I started the newspaper, a page of teenage personals was completely absent from my *Weltanschauung*. Like an editor arriving in a new town, I assigned students to beats — the math department, guidance, security, sports. Many copies were tossed. The paper took hold only after I learned to listen.

I asked students to compile lists of what made them angry, happy, or frustrated, and then helped turn these into reported articles. *Secret Crushes* emerged rather quickly, but so did serious investigations. Math now is covered when it needs to be.

Some faculty object privately to the paper's occasional embrace of street language ("Shorties' stressin' me for gifts, but in all reality they know it ain't bargin") and over-the-top illustrations (a cafeteria tray with a steaming dead rat accompanied an investigation of the lunchroom). In letters, students have criticized the paper's harsh and not always tactful reviews of school shows. A hurtful *Secret Crush* led the newspaper staff to suspend the column until the blunder could be debated in the pages of the paper.

Principal Cunningham defends the paper against all complaints, always asking first: Is the story accurate? Except for two instances — in thirty-eight issues — I have always been able to say yes.

The paper does not transform each individual it touches. A few marquee writers have become dropouts. But it does seem to have made democratic citizens out of just about everybody involved. How many schools in the U.S. can honestly say they are achieving that?

— Leslie Seifert

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