

Student editors file suit against censoring administrators

Although *The Tattler* has returned to campus for its final issue of the school year, the relationship between staff members and the school district remains strained.

At the beginning of June, eight senior editors of the Ithaca High School newspaper filed a lawsuit against the Ithaca City School District (ICSD). The suit alleges that the imposition of new guidelines for the paper deprived student editors of "rights, privileges and immunities secured by the First Amendment and the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States constitution."

Principal Joe Wilson and Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Bill Russell presented the

new guidelines to the paper's staff at the end of January. The new policy subjected all content to "final approval of the advisor."

The adviser (who reports to the principal, who reports to the superintendent) had the right "to change, edit or remove content" for two reasons: if it "would substantially interfere with the district's work or impinge upon the rights of other students" or if it "is inconsistent with the legitimate pedagogical concerns of the district (for example, content that is ungrammatical, poorly written, inadequately researched, inaccurate, libelous, biased or prejudiced, unethical, vulgar or profane, or is no suitable for immature audiences)."

The new guidelines followed a series of disagreements over content decisions that had been made, including stories critical of Wilson's new administration and a restaurant review that was perceived by many as "racist."

Under the new guidelines, a cartoon that had been scheduled for inclusion in the February issue was cut. The paper's editors under the Student Grievance Procedure filed appeals, but the administration upheld its position. In the wake of *The Tattler* Faculty Advisor Stephenie Vinch resigning, the paper started to publish underground.

Student editors published three editions, called *The Issue*, underground until returning to campus with a new

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faculty advisor, Roselyn Teukolsky, for the final edition, which was published June 8, less than a week after the complaint was filed in the United States Federal Court for the Northern District of New York in Syracuse. Civil rights attorney Raymond M. Schlather of LoPinto, Schlather, Solomon & Salk is representing the students *pro bono*.

According to the Student Press Law Center, a Washington, D.C.-based legal assistance agency that aids high school and college journalists with First Amendment issues, the censorship

standards imposed by ICSD can only be applied to a school newspaper that is a closed or nonpublic forum. *The Tattler* has traditionally operated as an open forum, a position that was also stated on its masthead until recently.

The June issue can be viewed online at www.myihigh.org or picked up at Center Ithaca.

"I'm glad that it was a *Tattler* again. It was a nice way to end the year," said Editor-in-Chief Rob Ochshorn, who will be attending Cornell University this fall. The staff has received "very positive response from the custodial staff" in

particular, he noted. Perhaps not coincidentally, the Ithaca City School District Employees Association (ICSDEA) staff has been struggling with the administration over its contract negotiation.

Senior editors will be "moving on to better places," and the fate of *The Tattler* remains to be seen. "It's a very cyclical thing, high school newspapers," Ochshorn said.

ICSD Superintendent Judith Pastel could not be reached for comment by presstime.

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