

First Amendment, Anyone?

STRIKE one: a student poll showing negative appeal of the new Ithaca High School (IHS) principal. Strike two: a restaurant review with cheesy (perhaps stereotypical?) references to Southerners. Strike three: an article critical of the new principal's Nazi reference. For students at *The Tattler*, IHS's student-run newspaper, it looks like the old baseball adage — three strikes and you're out — is holding true.

Last week, student staff members of *The Tattler* were presented with an updated set of operating guidelines that take away their rights to make decisions and put the power of censorship in the hands of school administrators. Though the district and IHS principal Joe Wilson are not naming any specific "issue" that brought about these mid-year changes, *The Tattler* staff has heard talk about specific articles.

In a day when the world's media are facing such criticism, when tales of Jason Blair-like plagiarism abound and when the country is seeking the truth from its media, the Ithaca City School District (ICSD) is censoring journalists at the most basic of levels.

True, racial slurs in a restaurant review are both unethical and unnecessary. But school administrators are portraying *The Tattler* as a "learning opportunity" and part of that process is learning from mistakes.

There is not a professional reporter or editor in the world who has not, at some point in their careers, made a mistake. Students, too, will make mistakes. Taking away their rights will not allow them to learn from the mistakes, it just teaches the students that the district has no respect for the First Amendment or laws against censorship.

Why is it that William Russell, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, Wilson and newspaper advisor Stephenie Vinch feel the need for prior review of both story ideas *and* stories? Is there something that they are trying to hide? In journalism even the "bad" news has to be printed. It's all news, whether the district looks good or not.

The new policy will also prohibit students from posting updated stories to their Web site between monthly print versions of *The Tattler*. Have school administrators ever visited a newspaper's Web site? The entire purpose of a Web site is to be able to update readers between one issue and the next — even daily newspapers have "breaking news" sections on their Web sites. If anything, wanting to report the news in a timely manner should be seen as responsible journalism.

It's time the ICSD Board of Education stands up for the First Amendment instead of worrying about public relations for the district. The best lesson that students can learn is their right to freedom of expression. ■