

Building a case for high school journalism

By Holly Epstein Ojalvo, New York Times

It's Day 2 of Student Journalism Week here on The Learning Network. On Monday, Frank LoMonte, executive director of the Student Press Law Center (SPLC), explained student journalists' First Amendment rights and the context in which student publications operate.

Today he provides some reasons, in the big picture, school journalism programs are valuable.

By Frank LoMonte

Journalism education is facing a “perfect storm” of peril.

Journalism classes are being crowded out by the urgency to drill students on core standardized-testing subjects. Cash-strapped states and districts are squeezing electives and extracurricular offerings in search of savings; one state, Kansas, nearly stopped financing journalism on the grounds that the profession no longer offers gainful career opportunities. And image-conscious school administrators are removing some of the profession's best teachers in retaliation for student writing that's considered excessively negative or controversial.

In this precarious time, those who study journalism, teach it or just value it must be extra-vigilant and extra-prepared to defend the continued importance of journalism education, even when salaried newsroom jobs are melting away faster than the polar ice caps.

Fortunately, the case is an easy one.

Workplace skills: Name something that an employer – any

employer – wants in a young employee. Analytical thinking? Clear writing? Sensitivity to deadlines? This should be starting to sound familiar – because it’s the package of skills that journalism conveys uniquely well through hands-on experience. Leadership? Check. Teamwork? Check. It’s one of very few school activities that accurately simulates a work environment – because it is a work environment.

Online civility: Imagine that you are a principal whose school is plagued by cyberbullying. You might well find yourself wishing for some magic antidote that would reinforce to students the importance of verifying their facts, correcting their errors, signing their real names to what they publish, entertaining opposing viewpoints and considering the impact of their words on others. This too should be starting to sound familiar – this too is journalism. The values imparted by working in a newsroom are the values that every educator wants every young citizen of the Internet to learn, practice and live.

Accountability of schools: The nonpartisan Brookings Institution reported in December 2009 that just 1.4 percent of the space and airtime in the mainstream media is going toward education coverage. Ever tried walking into a public school in 2011 with a reporter’s notebook and a camera? You’d get farther in the Pentagon. If professionals can’t bring us ample coverage news of conditions like overcrowded classrooms and ineffective curriculum, who can? Fortunately, there is an army of “embedded journalists” at the ready – the last, best watchdogs for the taxpayers who pay about \$590 billion a year to support K-12 education nationally. Adults need candid, uncensored student journalism if they are to have any idea what is going on inside the schools they support.

Ethics: If we’ve learned nothing else from paying for the party that Wall Street executives threw bundling up risky mortgage loans and selling them as securities, it’s that when a small number of influential people act in blind self-

interest, everyone suffers. Fortunately, there's an app for that – and yes, it too is journalism. Think of another academic subject that forces young people, on a daily basis, to weigh – and experience – the impact of their decisions on others, and to put the adherence to the truth ahead of personal gain. Geometry? Chemistry? English composition? Nope, nope and nope. By working in journalism – and by being given the freedom to fail and to learn from their failures – students experience what it means to be a “professional.”

Empowerment: If you are not the homecoming queen or the basketball captain, school can be a place of social isolation and self-doubt. Alienated, disempowered kids are at greatest risk for outcomes ranging from bad (dropping out) to horrible (suicide). But no peg is too square for the newsroom, where the creativity and smarts that mark students for ostracism suddenly become assets. Students who are allowed to make their own editorial judgments – with a light hand of guidance from a well-trained faculty adviser – experience the pride and validation for which teenagers are starved.

Journalism training may not guarantee a lucrative job as a magazine editor or a television anchor, but it remains a proven pathway to college and career success. Ask U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara of Manhattan, the “Colbert Report” producer Tom Purcell, the Emmy-winning actress Susan Lucci, the film reviewer Gene Shalit or the top-gun campaign consultant Mark J. Penn, each of whom got started as a high school journalist.

With America facing a well-documented deficit of civic engagement, journalism remains a portal through which students – whether as participants or simply as readers – engage with the larger world outside schoolhouse walls. It's essential that the doorway remain open and inviting.