

THE Spoke

*Editorial Independence at
Conestoga High School*

The Spoke is the student newspaper of Conestoga High School in Berwyn, Pennsylvania. The Spoke is consistently rated among the top high school newspaper in the country by national student press organizations. The Spoke staff also operate Stoganews.com, a news Web site that features breaking news updates as well as extended reporting, videography and photography by Spoke and TETV staff. Stoganews.com, named among the top four high school news sites in the country, has received 30,000 page views since its re-design four months ago.

This success—both print and online—is due in large part to the structure of the student newspaper. The Spoke is truly a *student* newspaper: students report, write, photograph, lay out pages, sell ads and get subscriptions and make important personnel and editorial decisions. As The Spoke’s publication policy says, “The Spoke serves as a public forum that gives all students an opportunity to express their views.”

All editorial decisions are handled by student editors on the paper, from deciding what stories to cover or how to design a page to ethical decisions that present themselves in reporting. The student editorial board is selected by the advisers, in consultation with the previous year’s editorial board.

The role of the adviser in The Spoke is to advise, not dictate; to consult, not censor. While the adviser can give their advice on issues that may arise and can exercise a veto, the editorial board ultimately can decide what goes into the paper and can override that veto. Further, The Spoke is editorially independent from school and district prior review or censorship, according to state law. With these rights, the staff on The Spoke assumes great responsibility that they will be accountable for their reporting, just like professional reporters.

This editorial independence and the role of the adviser as a mentor and aid in the journalism process has allowed The Spoke to produce award winning journalism on controversial topics. The Spoke’s 2008 investigation into illegal gambling at Conestoga was named the best high school newspaper story in the country for 2008. Reports this year about openly gay students and former students who are teen parents shed light on topics that are generally considered taboo in conversation. A forthcoming investigation about district hiring practices will inform the students and the community about a serious issue. Further, reports about teachers’ union negotiations explained to students what is at stake in a complicated process. Reports about bomb threats and student arrests serve to inform—not to feed rumors, but to prevent them by providing unbiased, objective reporting.

While the individual reporting and quality of the newspaper overall wins awards and recognition for not only The Spoke but the school, the central focus of Spoke reporters and editors is not to win awards. It is to inform. Reporters and editors recognize that the high school press has a great responsibility to cover their high schools, whose issues often go unnoticed in the local or national media.

The Spoke has an integral role. The paper serves the school and the community by reporting, fairly and honestly, the issues at stake. The Spoke is not a school cheerleader or muckraker—The Spoke pursues the facts and reporters are ethically and legally responsible. The Spoke reports issues that simply would not be reported anywhere else.

Reporters and editors feel that these issues need to be addressed, not swept under the rug. Addressing controversial issues makes for a stronger school community, identity and awareness about what is going on in the hallways of Conestoga and in other parts of the District. For it is information that leads to a more tolerant society, not the censorship of information. Students are taught in their government classes about First Amendment press rights and the power of a truly free press. And, seven times a year, they see that power in action.

Many students, not only Spoke staff, feel The Spoke is a place where their voices can be heard and they expect current issues to be addressed. They feel The Spoke does positive things for the school. That is manifested in many ways, from e-mails to staff with guest commentaries or Letters to the Editor, to focus groups where Conestoga students work with staff to make the paper better.

Not all students are happy with what The Spoke writes. And the views of unhappy students are often seen in the Letters to the Editor section of the paper. Letters sometimes complain about school policies or AP classes, but more often than not they voice their opinions on news or opinion articles published in the paper. The Spoke, committed to its role and sacred duty as an open forum for Conestoga, publishes those comments. After all, the same amendment newspapers rely on for protection also includes the guarantee of freedom of speech.

The Spoke, as an official “public forum,” is afforded many legal guarantees that professional newspaper have. As a student run newspaper, neither advisers nor administrators can control, in any way, its content, provided that the content does not “materially” disrupt “class work or involves substantial disorder or invasion of the rights of others.”

Further, being a Pennsylvania publication, The Spoke is afforded additional guarantees about its editorial independence. “The Pennsylvania Code’s section on Student Rights and Responsibilities is such a provision and should provide student journalists attending Pennsylvania public high schools with added protection against administrative censorship,” according to the Student Press Law Center, a Virginia-based organization whose lawyers analyze and protect student press rights.

But when prior review, prior restraint and the threat of censorship enter the dialogue for a student newspaper, the results can be none other than negative, not only for the student staff but for the students of the school. As Thomas Jefferson famously said, “our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost.”

The “power of the press” at Conestoga makes for a more accepting school community, one that is more aware of the differences that make each student here unique. The Spoke highlights the success of the students—in sports, music, academics or extracurricular—but also investigates issues when, like in the openly gay student article, students are being harassed at school. Re-

porters accept responsibility for writing stories like that one because they know that what they write is so much more important than the byline or the flurry of excitement when the paper comes out. It's about adding to the dialogue in a school, it's about informing. And informing students will make for a more accepting community.

Are the openly gay students going to still be harassed if the school newspaper just glosses over a controversial topic? Yes. But if a newspaper makes the courageous decision to report on this issue, lives are changed, tolerance increased and ignorance destroyed. How would the students who illegally bet hundreds of dollars on sports know that their actions were not only addictive but illegal? The school wasn't saying it, parents weren't saying it and society wasn't saying it. But The Spoke was.

Arthur Miller once said that a good newspaper is a nation talking to itself. And that, on a slightly smaller scale, is the ultimate goal of The Spoke: The Spoke tells the school and community not only what they want to hear, but what they need to hear. And the only way to tell the full story—the full story that needs to be told—is to do so without the looming threat of censorship.

APPENDIX A: EDITORIAL STRUCTURE

The Spoke staff consists of reporters and editors. The current system has proved to very effective in not only producing a quality publication, but exposing students to the management and decision making side of the newspaper industry. The editors are divided into a Managerial Board, which consists of the paper's Editor in Chief and Managing Editors. The Managerial Board is the final student authority in the paper; the Editor in Chief, oftentimes the representative of the students to the advisers, has the power to make the final decisions. Similar setups are at work in newsrooms nationwide.

APPENDIX B: SPOKE AWARDS FROM THE PAST TWO YEARS

The Spoke consistently receives the Gold Award from the Pennsylvania School Press Association and is a Columbia Scholastic Press Association Gold Medalist. The Spoke was named one of the top newspapers in Pennsylvania for the 2008-2009 school year by the Pennsylvania School Press Association. The Keystone-All State award, the highest award for a student newspaper in the state, was awarded to only one other newspaper.

Stoganews.com was named one of the best high school newspaper Web sites in the country in February 2009 by the Columbia University Scholastic Press Association.

Individually, reporters, photographers, artists and designers win many state and national awards. Over the past two years, students have received 57 gold awards from PSPA. And, as mentioned earlier, The Spoke's gambling investigation was named the best high school news story in the country.

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