

Friends of The Spoke

www.friendsofthespoke.org

68 Birch Lane
Paoli, PA 19301

July 2009

Dear loyal supporter,

We write to you today to inform you of a pending policy change in the Tredyffrin/Easttown School District that would directly impact The Spoke. For more than 15 years, the district has had the same policy on the books for dealing with student publications. In short, we have had an understanding with the district—both written and unspoken—that The Spoke is meant to be a *student* publication, with *students* having the right to select content they feel necessary and appropriate to share with you, the community we serve. With that charge comes great journalistic responsibility, and we shoulder the same obligations as professional journalists. At a recent Policy Committee meeting, it was announced that the school board hopes to significantly revise the policy (#5332), turning an 86-word document into seven pages of rules. This change would dramatically alter the way The Spoke currently operates and lead to censorship.

Although we still do not know with absolute certainty what this policy would mean for The Spoke—and for all student publications in the district—we do have some serious concerns stemming from the language used in the proposal. First and foremost, it is apparent that the district and school board have grown increasingly unhappy with our content over the past year, and are trying to implement a system of prior review on the newspaper. From both a legal and an educational perspective, we find this unacceptable.

If our school administration were to have the power to veto content in The Spoke—which is being proposed—we would refrain from covering topical issues that could be deemed controversial, simply out of the fear that the story would be seen as “objectionable” and pulled at the last minute. It is our belief that all of our feature articles this year—from coverage on the climate facing gay and lesbian students to a story about teenage pregnancy to reporting on statewide school hiring practices—were done in a manner reflective of the highest standards of journalistic integrity. If this policy proposal had been in place during the most recent academic year (2008-09), we can say with certainty that our editorial decisions regarding content would have differed significantly.

Secondly, an accompanying regulation proposal spells out a role expectation for the adviser to the student publication. In essence, we believe that this role expectation stipulates that the adviser is ultimately charged with the responsibility to teach students how to be good journalists—as any educator should do—while at the same time working to censor them upon instruction

from the school administration. Once again, we firmly believe that The Spoke is meant to be a *student* publication. Our advisers, while consummate, experienced professionals, should have a job description characteristic of that of an educator; to advise, not dictate; to consult, not censor.

Our intention behind writing this letter is not only to inform you of proposed changes in the district, but to ask for your help. We have already met with a key person on the Policy Committee, but there is still much work to be done. So, we are asking you, a loyal supporter of The Spoke over the years, to help us by writing a letter to the district and school board. We have enclosed a number of items in this envelope. Among these items, you will find a copy of the district's current policy for student publications, as well as the proposal that was distributed at the most recent Policy Committee meeting. In addition, you will find copies of two articles that have run in local newspapers—the Cape Cod Times and Main Line Suburban Life—that deal with our current situation. These should serve as a good summary of both sides of the dispute.

So far, the district has said they have received some negative feedback concerning coverage in The Spoke over the past year. There are always some who object to content in any newspaper, and the district so far has only heard their side. Therefore, we are humbly asking you, our readers—the people we have the responsibility to serve—to write a letter expressing the value you feel The Spoke has and why the articles we write have a place in informing the community.

If you would be willing to help us, please go to www.friendsofthespoke.org and fill out the online form provided. You can write an actual letter, or an e-mail—whichever you prefer. Either way, you will be contacted via e-mail with points to consider including in your letter or e-mail. If you select to write an actual letter, we will mail you pre-addressed envelopes; if you select e-mail, we will provide you with e-mail addresses. We will be glad to answer any questions you might have about this proposal or about our publication.

In our years on The Spoke, we have been able to conduct nationally award-winning journalism, learning not only how to write and report but also the moral and ethical considerations that come with the territory. If this policy passes, The Spoke will be censored, and the newspaper will cease to produce the quality journalism that you have come to expect. In all, The Spoke has taught us more than any of our academic classes could: skills such as how to work as a team and take responsibility. Students in future years simply will not have those experiences—not only to write and report, but to learn and fulfill their full potentials as journalists and individuals.

Thank you for your continued support of scholastic journalism at Conestoga High School.

Sincerely,

Seth Zweifler
Editor in Chief 2009-2010

Henry Rome
Editor in Chief 2008-2009

Jonathan Yu
Co-Editor in Chief 2007-2008