

**Michigan Senate Judiciary Committee
Testimony of Chris Robbins, a student at Plymouth-Canton Educational Park
Senate Bill 848 (The Student Free Press and Civics Readiness Act)
For committee hearing of March 22, 2016**

My name is Chris Robbins. I work on the Perspective student newspaper at Plymouth-Canton Educational Park.

I'd like to thank you all for considering Senate Bill 848. I'd like to talk to you today about how much journalism has meant to me and fellow students on our newspaper staff. Working on the newspaper is a special learning experience for us, in large part because we are responsible for determining the content of the newspaper.

Thanks to journalism, I have been exposed to many different types of people and cultures that I wouldn't have gotten to experience without our student-run newspaper.

Being a member of a student newspaper staff also has helped me become more active in issues going on around me. I pay more attention to what's happening around me because of the time I've spent covering different charity events and reporting on news stories from around our community. Discussing other topics with students in my class has also helped me pay more attention to things. I have attended board meetings on the district budget and teacher contract negotiations, key issues that I may not have even known about if I wasn't a part of the newspaper.

When one of our reporters got to cover the Republican debate in Detroit, the newspaper staff discussed this story in class. It was impressive how many staff members had paid attention and knew about the positions of the different candidates and could form their own opinions on them.

Students who are on newspaper tend to be more aware of what's happening around them. One particular instance of this happening to me was when I was working on a story for our December edition.

I submitted a Freedom of Information Act request to my school district, Plymouth-Canton, for emails about how the school blocks certain websites from its computer network. It was the first FOIA I've ever submitted, and the district billed me \$8,806 for the information I requested. In the midst of this, different news stories were coming out about the Freedom of Information Act nationally, particularly related to Hillary Clinton's emails and the recent Flint water crisis. Through my experience, I learned firsthand what FOIA is, how it's used and why it's important. In the end, I was able to get some of the information I needed for my story without paying that big bill.

Here's what one of our Editors-in-Chief, Miriam Sponsler, says about being more civically engaged because of journalism:

“Being in a student-run newspaper I have become more aware of rights I have and things I am entitled to as a United States citizen. Knowing this has led to more involvement for me in the presidential election. I now know what I like in different candidates and who I want running our country.”

Making coverage decisions for our newspaper is also a unique experience for students like me. It is something that can be difficult at times, yet extremely rewarding. We often make these decisions as a team, putting into practice the lessons that our teacher gives us about journalistic standards and responsibilities. As a Sports Editor, one of my favorite things to do is decide which stories should be put where in the print edition.

We take a lot of care when we choose what stories to cover, based on what we feel our readers would be interested in. It is very encouraging as a student journalist to get other students involved as well. Starting discussions about topics some of our readers may not have thought about before is something only student-run newspapers can do on a school campus. Genevieve St. Jean, one of our News Editors says:

“Whenever we write stories, we try to relate stories back to our readers and community as often as we can. We try and choose the stories to cover that relate to the most readers possible.”

We’re also learning how to use digital technologies to get information out to students in our school through our website and social media. Ashley Hegener, our Online Editor-in-Chief says:

“We do brainstorming sessions after the print edition does. We try to do things that aren’t too similar to what we cover in newspaper and it helps us cover everything that is happening that our readers care about. It’s an extension of the newspaper that makes it accessible to everyone who wants to read it.”

Our website also helps us give updates about stories and add more context. For example, when I worked on the FOIA story, we posted some of the emails we obtained on our website so readers could see beyond the story.

Overall, being a student journalist is a unique experience. It has definitely helped everyone in our class be more aware of what is going on around us. Making coverage decisions, being a part of a team that works together and learning how to be an effective writer are crucial experiences that are best learned in a newspaper setting where students control the content.

Thank you for the opportunity to share some of the experiences of the staff at my school newspaper. I hope you will support this bill to help students like us continue to have these opportunities.

Respectfully,

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