

Chapter 2. Profile of Student Attitudes

Introduction

The “Future of the First Amendment” research project is the most comprehensive survey ever conducted on knowledge and attitudes about the First Amendment in American high schools. Many of the findings provide baseline information about media programs in American high schools that, for perhaps the first time ever, provides a clear picture of the levels of student participation and how they use media in classrooms. Especially interesting are the findings linking the effect of participation in media activities and First Amendment or journalism-related classes on student levels of tolerance and knowledge of the First Amendment. Comparisons of the different groups in the study, teachers and principals versus students, for example, also provide telling differences in tolerance and knowledge levels.

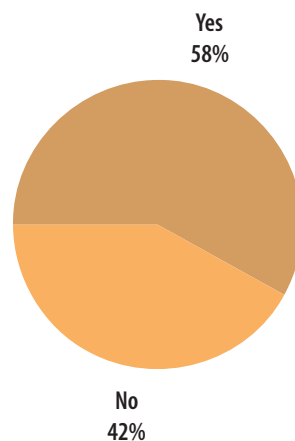
A profile of students

Classes:

Students were asked a series of questions regarding the specific types of courses they’ve taken dealing with aspects of the First Amendment and/or the media. While many students have taken general courses dealing with those general subjects, significantly fewer have taken courses that deal specifically with learning journalism skills. There are also some differences across school type (public versus private, suburban versus rural versus urban, etc.).

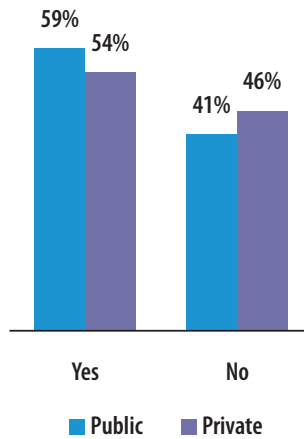
The majority (58 percent) of students surveyed have taken classes in high schools that dealt with the First Amendment. A slightly higher percentage of public school students (59 percent) than private school students (54 percent) have taken classes that dealt with the First Amendment. Students in rural areas (61 percent) are slightly more likely to have taken these types of classes than students in suburban (58 percent) and urban (56 percent) areas.

Taken classes in high school that dealt with the 1st Amendment?



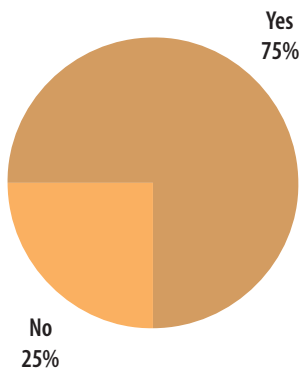
Classes dealing with First Amendment

Public vs. private

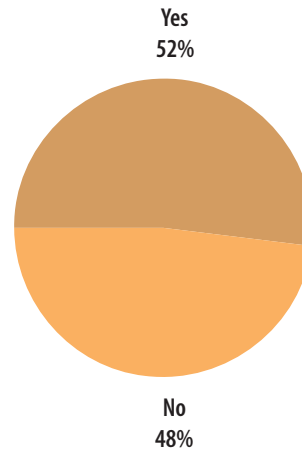


While the vast majority of students have had some experience in the classroom with using the media for specific class assignments, fewer have taken classes that specifically discussed the media's role in our society. Three-quarters (76 percent) of students say they have taken a course in which the teacher required them to read a newspaper or watch television news as a class assignment. However, when it comes to courses that study the role of the media and how it impacts our society in various ways, fewer still (52 percent) have taken courses. Of course, the latter is a more specialized type of course and would probably fall into an elective category at most high schools.

Taken a course where teacher required you to read a newspaper or watch TV news as a class assignment?

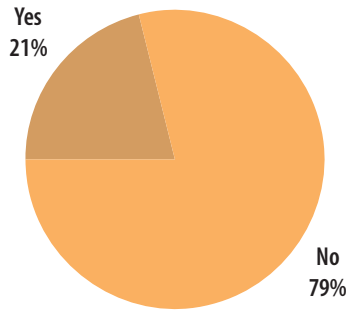


Taken a course discussing the role of media in society?



Significantly fewer students overall have taken courses that teach journalism skills. Less than a quarter (21 percent) have taken classes in high school that dealt primarily with journalism skills. A greater percentage of students from economically disadvantaged areas (26 percent) have taken such courses than students from higher income areas—lower middle income (22 percent), middle income (19 percent), upper income (21 percent).

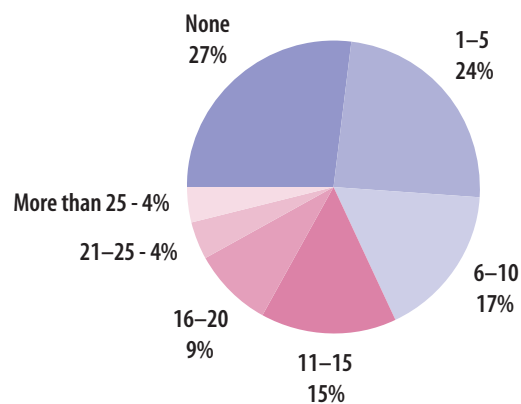
Taken classes in high school that dealt primarily with journalism skills?



Activities:

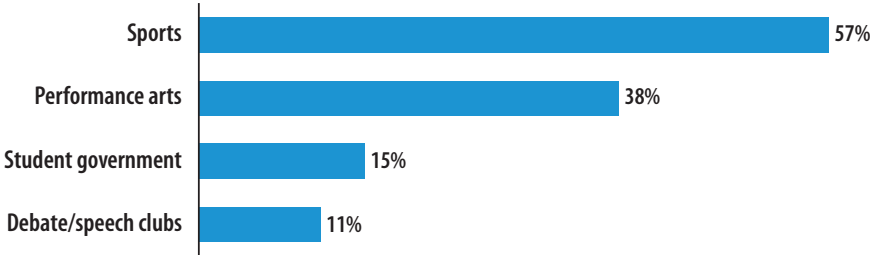
Nearly all principals (99 percent) and teachers (97 percent) surveyed feel that it is important for ALL students to participate in some extracurricular activities or clubs. However, over a quarter (27 percent) of the high school students surveyed say they do not spend any time during an average week participating in extracurricular activities. On the other hand, the majority of students (73 percent) do spend some time participating in various extracurricular activities. And a full majority (56 percent) of students say they spend between one and 15 hours engaging in such activities during an average week.

Extracurricular activities—average hours per week



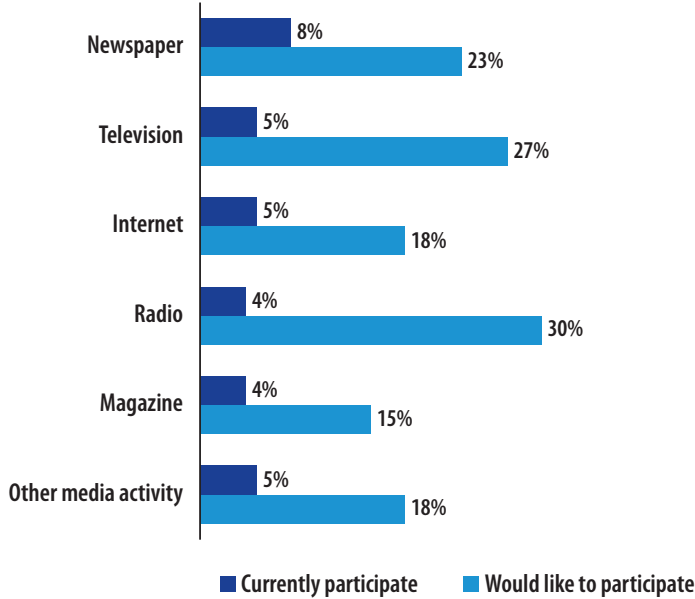
Students participate in a wide variety of clubs and activities ranging from sports to performance arts to school newspapers. However, when it comes to extracurricular activities, sports are the clear favorite among high school students; in fact, sports are the only activities in which the majority (57 percent) of all students participate. Many students (38 percent) participate in performance arts activities and considerably fewer participate in student government (15 percent) or debate/speech (11 percent).

Participation in extracurricular activities



By contrast, when it comes to media-related extracurricular activities, a fairly low percentage of students participate. Higher percentages (ranging from 17 and 32 percent depending on the activity) say they would like to participate if the activity eventually became available at their school. Access to media-related activities is more scarce than it is for many other activities. Whereas nearly all high schools offer some type of sports program, fewer offer media-related activities.

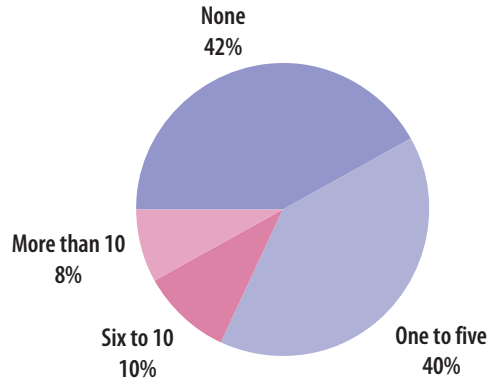
Participation in media-related extracurricular activities



Community participation:

Most students do not limit their activities to those offered at their high school; many are active in their communities as well. The majority (58 percent) of high school students surveyed spend time during an average week participating in community related activities.

Community activities—average hours per week



These students who participate in their communities do so in several ways. Thirty-five percent volunteer for community service organizations, 32 percent volunteer for service at religious organizations, and 28 percent participate in community social clubs or organizations.

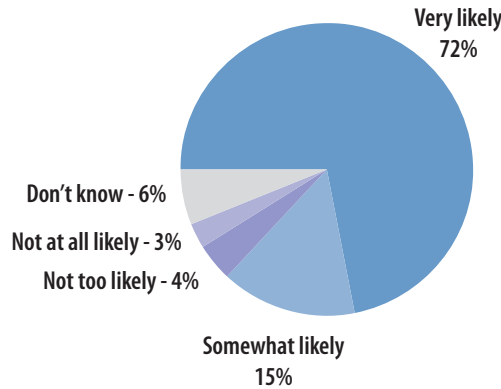
Community activities



College plans:

Overall, most students (72 percent) say they are very likely to go to college after high school. Fifteen percent say it is somewhat likely they will attend college, 4 percent say not too likely, 3 percent say not at all likely and 6 percent are not sure if they will attend college or not.

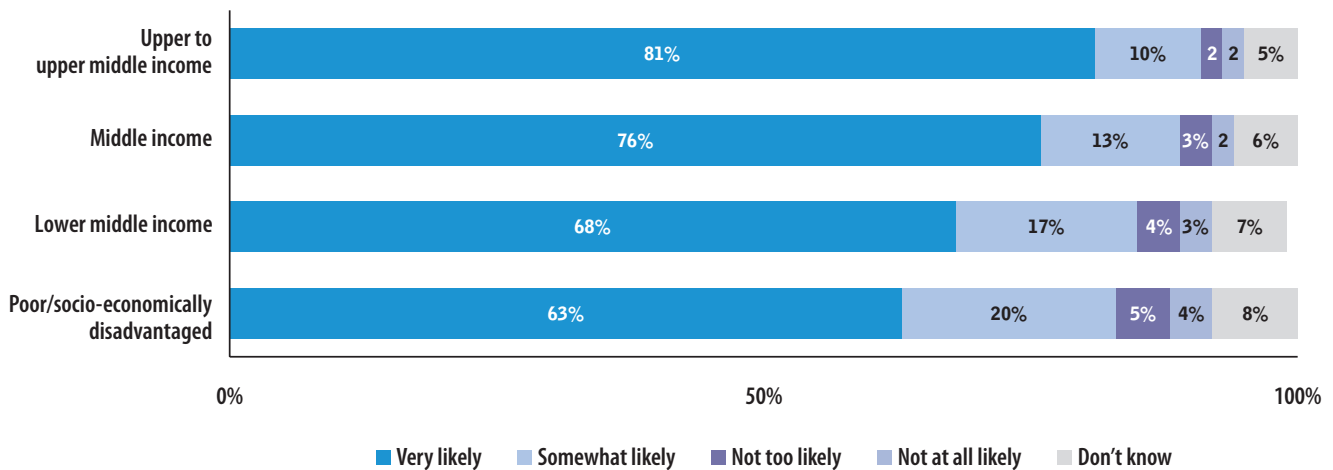
Likelihood of attending college



Although most high school students say they are likely to go to college, some categories of students are more sure than others. A greater percentage of students attending private schools (85 percent) say they are very likely to go to college after high school. By way of comparison, 71 percent of students attending public schools say they are very likely to go to college. Additionally, a greater percentage of students attending schools in higher income areas say they are very likely (81 percent) to go on to college. A smaller percentage of students in lower income areas say college is very likely for them—76 percent of middle-income students, 68 percent of lower middle-income students and 63 percent of poor income students say it is very likely. Suburban students also say they are slightly more likely to go on to college (77 percent) than urban (73 percent) and rural (68 percent) students.

Likelihood of attending college

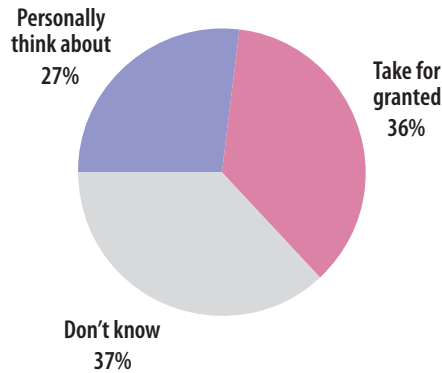
By income level



Tolerance and knowledge of the First Amendment

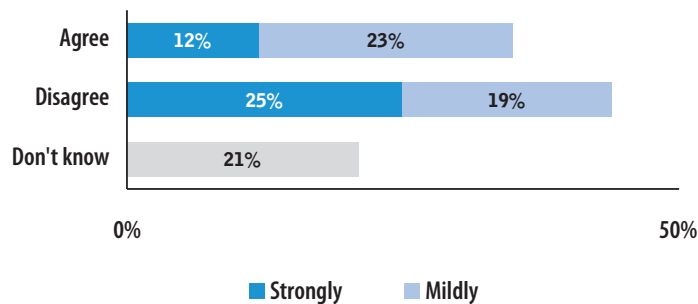
High school students overall tend to express little appreciation for the First Amendment. When asked about whether they take the First Amendment for granted, nearly three quarters (73 percent) of the students surveyed say either they do not know how they feel, or agree that they take it for granted. And a mere 27 percent of students say they personally think about these rights.

Personally think about or take for granted First Amendment rights?



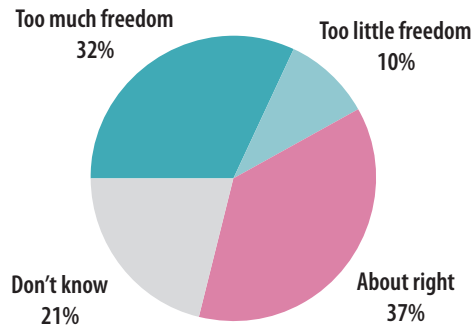
Similarly, over a third of high school students (35 percent) agreed after having the First Amendment read to them that it goes too far in the rights it guarantees; less than half (44 percent) disagreed. Again, many students were not even sure of their opinion on this statement—21 percent of students say they don't know if they agree or disagree that the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees.

The First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees—agree or disagree?



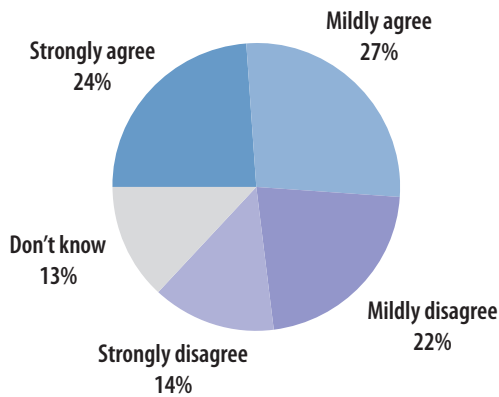
Since over a third of high school students think the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees, it is not surprising that nearly the same percentage (32 percent) thinks the press in America has too much freedom. Still, a slightly greater percentage (37 percent) thinks the amount of freedom the press in America has is about right. Very few (just 10 percent) think the press in America has too little freedom and again, many are unsure of how they feel about this issue (21 percent say don't know).

Overall, do you think the press in America has too much freedom to do what it wants, too little freedom to do what it wants, or is the amount of freedom the press has about right?

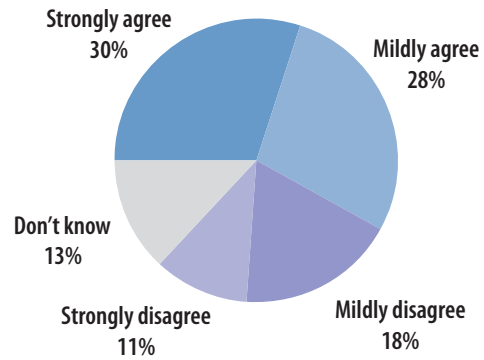


Although many students think the press in America has too much freedom, a narrow majority agree that newspapers should be allowed to publish freely without government approval of a story. Still, more than a third (36 percent) disagree that newspapers should be able to publish freely. And not surprisingly, an even larger majority of students (58 percent) agree that high school students should be allowed to report on controversial issues in their student newspapers without the approval of school authorities.

Newspapers should be allowed to publish freely without government approval of a story.

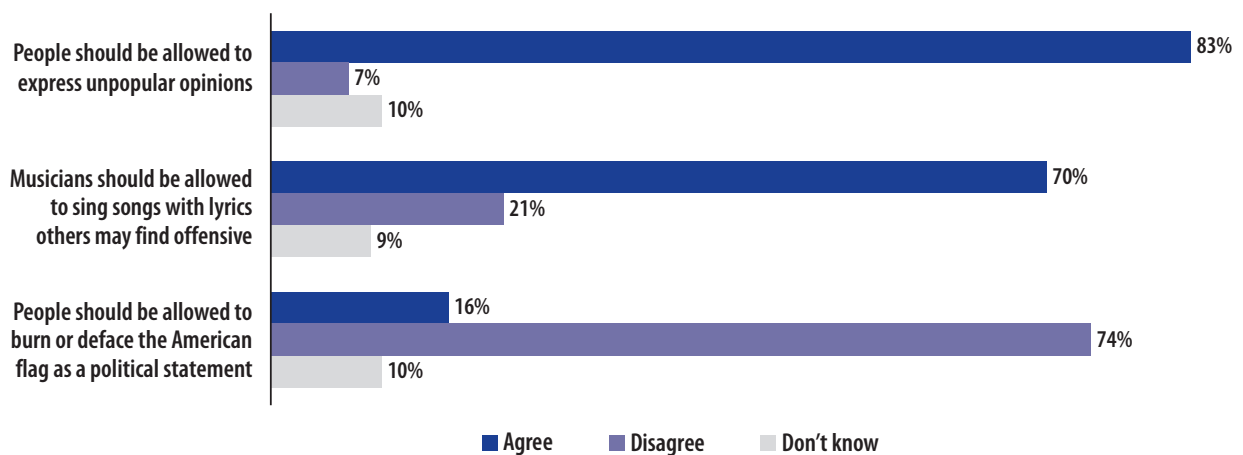


High school students should be allowed to report controversial issues in their student newspapers without the approval of school authorities.



Students are more conflicted when it comes to their tolerance for the expression of specific First Amendment rights. As was already noted, while a slight majority supports the right of newspapers to publish freely without government approval of stories, many do not support that right. Students are similarly conflicted when it comes to different ways in which one may express First Amendment freedoms. A strong majority (83 percent) agrees that people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions. However, when it comes to specific exercises of the right to express such an opinion, such as burning or defacing the American flag as a political statement, just 16 percent agree that people should be allowed to do it.

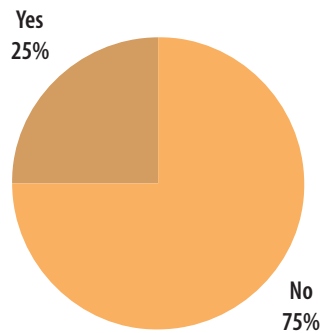
Expression of First Amendment rights



When it comes to students' knowledge of the First Amendment, high school students apparently have much to learn. To be sure, more than three quarters (77%) of students correctly disagreed that under current law, a person has the legal right to shout "fire" in a crowded arena as a prank.

However, other actions relating to the First Amendment are not so clearly understood. When asked if the government has the right under current law to restrict indecent material on the Internet, students are split in their responses. While 51 percent correctly said the government is not allowed to do it, nearly as many, 49 percent, said this was allowed. The biggest misunderstanding of current law, however, comes on the controversial issue of burning the American flag as a means of political protest. Just a quarter of high school students (25 percent) correctly answered that under current law, Americans do have the legal right to burn the American flag as a means of political protest. The majority in this case (75%) answered incorrectly.

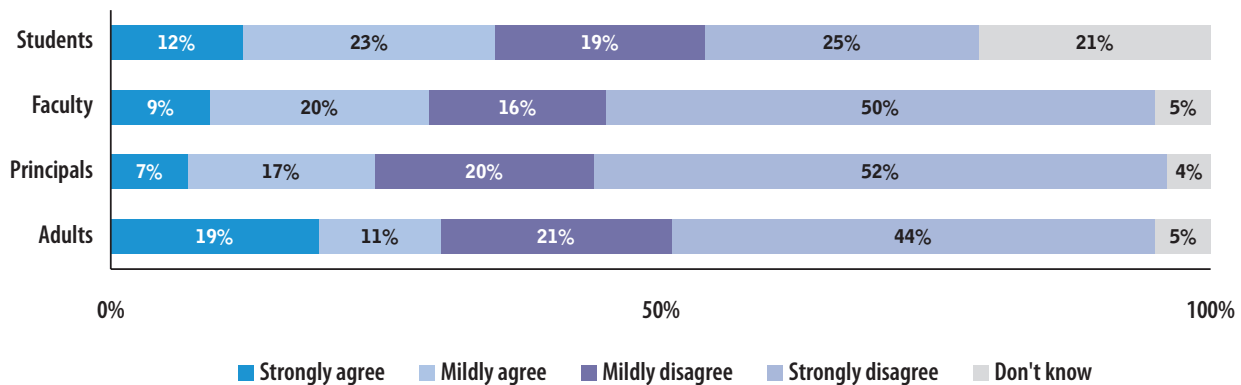
Under current law, do Americans have the legal right to burn the American flag as a means of political protest?



Differences among students, teachers, principals, and adults

Students differ significantly from faculty and principals as to whether or not the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees. Less than half (43 percent) of the students asked disagree that the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees. However, the majority of both teachers (66 percent) and principals (72 percent) disagree that the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees. Based on the 2004 State of the First Amendment survey, the national adult population lines up much closer to the teachers and faculty, with 65 percent disagreeing that the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees.

Agree or disagree: "The First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees"



Freedom of speech:

Students also differ from teachers, principals and adults in their tolerance of various forms of expressing First Amendment rights. Certainly students appreciate the First Amendment in different ways and to differing degrees than adults. Adults, including both the teachers and the principals surveyed, are more apt to agree with the traditional forms of expressing one's First Amendment rights (expressing unpopular opinions and publishing newspapers freely without government approval of stories). However, when it comes to more modern issues such as (1) whether or not musicians should be allowed to sing songs with lyrics some may find offensive; and (2) whether or not high school students should be allowed to report controversial issues in their papers without approval from school authorities, students agree at higher rates than adults that such forms of expression should be allowed.

Expression of First Amendment rights

Percent who agree (except where noted)

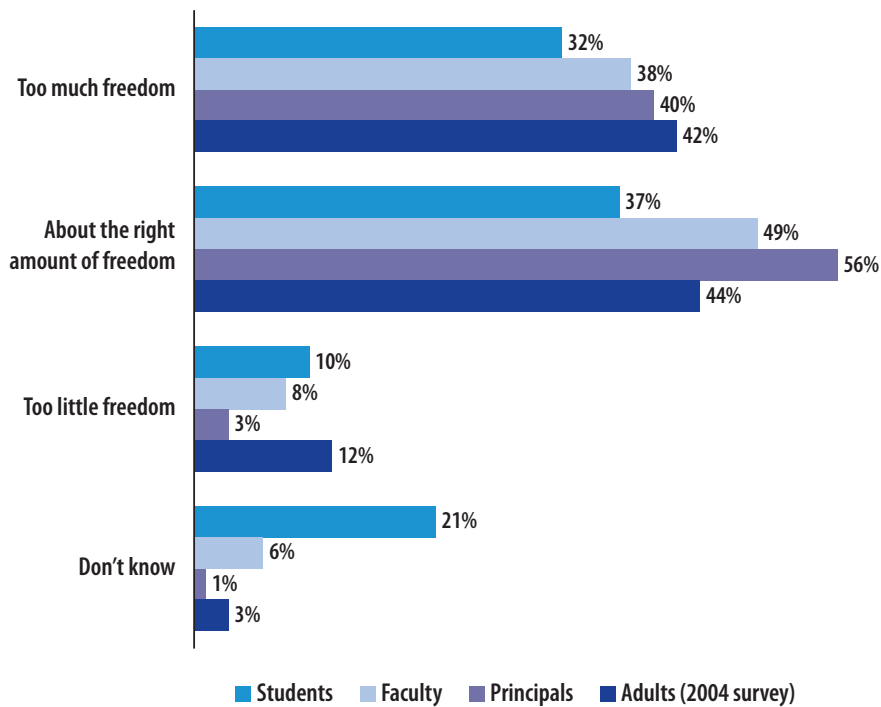
Issue	Students	Faculty	Principals	Adults*
Should be allowed to express unpopular opinion	83%	97%	99%	95% (2003)
Should be allowed to burn/deface flag in protest (% disagree)	74	70	75	74 (2001)
Musicians should be allowed to sing songs with lyrics others may find offensive	70	58	43	59 (2004)
Newspapers should be allowed to publish freely without government approval of stories	51	80	80	70 (2003)
High school students should be allowed to report controversial issues without approval of school authorities	58	39	25	43 (2000)

*The adult population is surveyed annually in the State of the First Amendment survey conducted by the Freedom Forum. Data listed is from most recent Freedom Forum survey in which the question was asked.

Freedom of the press:

The majority of principals (56 percent) and a plurality of teachers (49 percent) think the press in America has about the right amount of freedom to do what it wants. About 4 in 10 teachers and principals think the press in America has too much freedom to do what it wants. Students, on the other hand, are more conflicted in their opinion as to whether there is too much or the right amount of freedom of the press. Thirty-seven percent of high school students think the press has about the right amount of freedom to do what it wants. About a third (32 percent) of students think the press in America has too much freedom and 21 percent say they are not sure how they feel about this issue. The opinions of the national adult population fall between those expressed by the principals and teachers and those expressed by the students. Adults are fairly split between thinking the press in America has about the right amount of freedom (44 percent) and that the press has too much freedom (42 percent). Smaller percentages of each group think the press in America has too little freedom to do what it wants (12 percent of adults, 8 percent of faculty, 3 percent of principals and 10 percent of students).

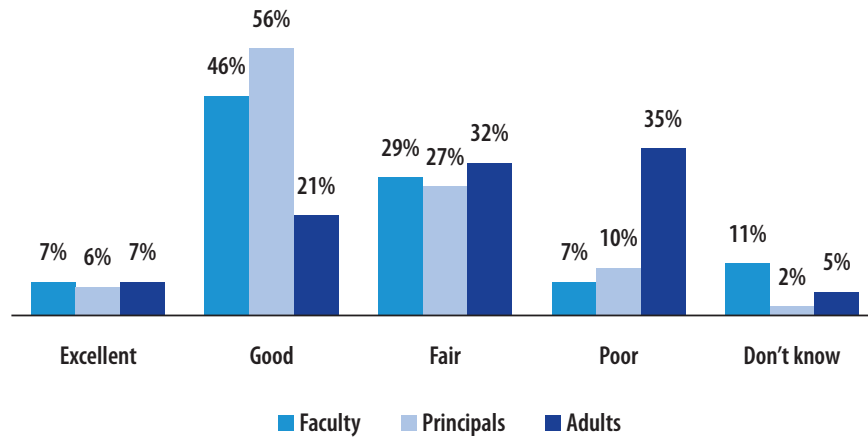
Overall, do you think the press in America has too much freedom to do what it wants, too little freedom to do what it wants, or is the amount of freedom the press has about right?



First Amendment education:

Most teachers (75 percent) and principals (83 percent) think that the United States educational system does a good or fair job teaching students about First Amendment freedoms. Interestingly, only 7 percent of teachers and 6 percent of principals think the U.S. educational system does an excellent job in this area. A significantly smaller majority (53 percent) of the national adult population believes the U.S. educational system does a good or fair job teaching students about First Amendment freedoms. In fact, more than a third (35 percent) say the educational system does a poor job in this area.

Overall, how would you rate the job that the American educational system does in teaching students about First Amendment freedoms?



Understanding of the law:

Most (76 percent) of the high school students surveyed think that it is illegal to burn or deface the United States flag as a form of protest. However, this controversial practice is currently protected as a form of free speech under the First Amendment (i.e., it is not currently illegal to burn or deface the American flag as a means of political protest). Four in 10 teachers (40 percent) and 3 in 10 (31 percent) principals also believe that Americans do not have the legal right to burn the American flag as a means of political protest. In comparison, a majority of the national adult population (58 percent) believe it is illegal to burn the flag as a means of political protest.

Understanding of Current Laws

Issue	Students		Teachers		Principals	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Do Americans have the legal right to burn the American flag as a means of political protest? (Yes)	25%	76%	60%	40%	69%	31%
Do the courts have the right to send reporters to jail for refusing to reveal a news source? (Depends on state)	31	69	54	46	67	33
Does the government have the right to restrict indecent material on the Internet? (No)	49	51	50	50	50	50
Does someone have the legal right to shout "fire" in a crowded arena as a prank? (No)	23	77	8	92	2	98

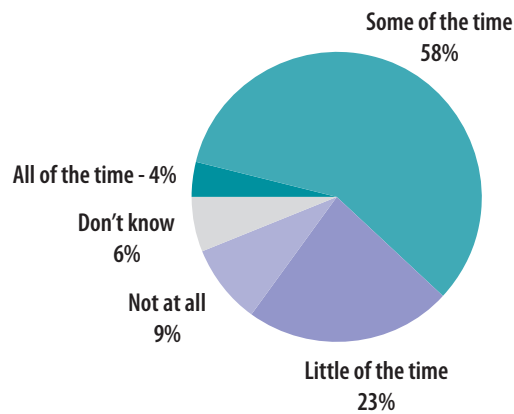
Correct answer is in bold after question.

Trust in journalists:

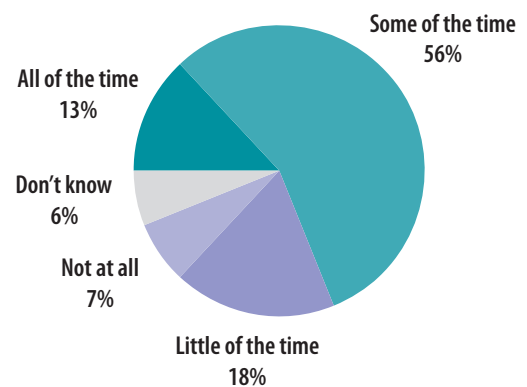
Overall, high school students seem to be less trusting of journalists than teachers. While just 62 percent of students think journalists tell the truth all or some of the time, 83 percent of teachers think they do. Still, just 4 percent of both students and teachers believe journalists tell the truth all of the time. When we take a look at certain groups of students we see a very different trend. Students who participate in student newspapers (13 percent) and students who are high on the Activity Participation Index* (17 percent) are more likely to believe that journalists tell the truth all of the time. Still, overall, teachers have more trust in journalists to tell the truth than students.

How much do you trust journalists to tell the truth? Do you believe they tell the truth...

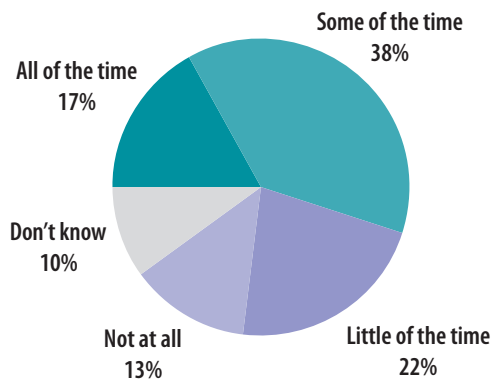
Students



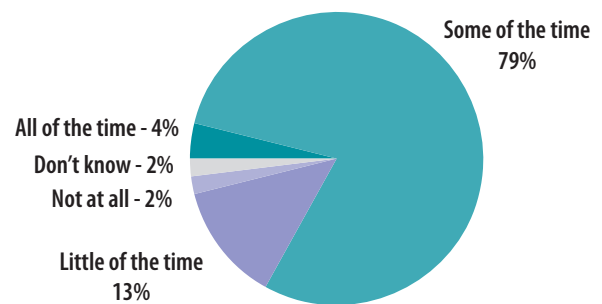
Student newspaper participants



High API students



Teachers



*See page 36 for API definition.

Sources of news:

Students get their news from different places than teachers and principals do. While television is the most common place for students to get their news everyday (41 percent), radio is the most common source for everyday news for both teachers (72 percent) and principals (74 percent). Newspapers are nearly as common as the radio as a news source for principals—70 percent read a paper everyday. However, for teachers, local television news (63 percent watch everyday) is more frequently used than newspapers (55 percent read everyday).

How often, if at all, do you get news from each of the following sources?

	Students	Teachers	Principals
Source	% every day	% every day	% every day
Newspaper	13%	55%	70%
Radio	29	72	74
Television	41	63*	59*
National TV	38	49	46
Internet	20	32	29

*Local TV; number one source of news for each population is in bold.

While the majority (62 percent) of principals read a weekly news magazine, fewer teachers (47 percent) do. Students, not surprisingly, are less likely to read a weekly news magazine, as just 2 in 10 (20 percent) say they read one of the three weeklies. However, when we isolate students who participate in student newspapers or fare high on the Activity Participation Index, a third or more students read the weekly news magazines (33 percent of student newspaper participants and 35 percent of students high on the API).

Do you read any weekly news magazine such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *U.S. News & World Report*?

All students

