

Survey Finds First Amendment Is Being Left Behind in U.S. High Schools

A new national study, the largest of its kind, says America's high schools are leaving the First Amendment behind.

In particular, educators are failing to give high school students an appreciation of the First Amendment's guarantees of free speech and a free press, say researchers from the University of Connecticut, who questioned more than 100,000 high school students, nearly 8,000 teachers, and more than 500 administrators and principals.

The two-year, \$1 million research project, titled "The Future of the First Amendment," was commissioned by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

The survey suggests that First Amendment rights – freedom of speech, of the press, of religion, of assembly and the right to petition the government for a redress of grievances – would be universally known if they were classroom staples.

"High school attitudes about the First Amendment are important because each generation of citizens helps define what freedom means in our society," the report reads.

Among its findings:

- Nearly three-fourths of high school students either do not know how they feel about the First Amendment or admit they take it for granted.
- Seventy-five percent erroneously think flag burning is illegal.
- Half believe the government can censor the Internet.
- More than a third think the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees.

“These results are not only disturbing; they are dangerous,” said Knight Foundation President and CEO Hodding Carter III. “Ignorance about the basics of this free society is a danger to our nation’s future.”

In addition, the more students are exposed to the First Amendment and use the news media in the classroom, and the more involved they are in student journalism, the greater their appreciation of First Amendment rights.

Among those students who have taken courses dealing with the media or the First Amendment, for example, 87 percent believe people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions. Among students who have not taken such courses, however, the number fell to 68 percent.

Though student journalists are the savviest among all high school students on the First Amendment, a quarter of U.S. schools do not even offer media programs to students.

“The last 15 years have not been a golden era for student media,” said Warren Watson, director of the J-Ideas project at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind. “Programs are under siege or dying from neglect. Many students do not get the opportunity to practice our basic freedoms.”

Nearly all principals surveyed agreed students should learn about journalism, but said financial constraints block the expansion of media programs.

The Department of Public Policy at the University of Connecticut was commissioned by Knight Foundation to conduct this study of students, faculty and administrators at 544 high schools across the country. Dr. David Yalof and Dr. Kenneth Dautrich of the University of Connecticut conducted the research.

“Civic education is crucial to developing well-informed and responsible citizens,” said Dautrich, chairman of the university’s Department of Public Policy. “By surveying students across the country as to their awareness and appreciation of First Amendment rights, Knight Foundation has provided a timely window into this important and often overlooked aspect of the educational process.”

Knight Foundation commissioned a panel of experts to consult and comment on the project. Project advisers included Jack Dvorak of Indiana University; Rosalind Stark of the Student Press Law Center (and formerly of the Radio and Television News Directors Foundation); Diana Mitsu Klos of the American Society of Newspaper Editors; Warren Watson of J-Ideas; Scott Olson, former dean of Ball State University’s College of Communications, Information and Media now at Minnesota State University, Mankato; Gene Policinski, executive director of the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center; and Dr. Kristin Moore, president and senior scholar, Child Trends.

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation promotes excellence in journalism worldwide and invests in the vitality of 26 U.S. communities.

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