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## **CIVICS 101: Censoring students robs democracy**

**BYLINE:** **JOE DENNIS**; For the Journal-Constitution**SECTION:** EDITORIAL; Pg. 13A**LENGTH:** 660 words

There are very few places in high school where students are actually encouraged to develop their own viewpoints and opinions, even if they differ from what's taught by the teacher or read in the textbook. The high school newspaper is one of those places.

In addition to being a monthly publication of school news and student achievement, it serves as a community bulletin board for student opinions. On these pages students learn how to carefully craft their thoughts into meaningful words, and how to tolerate and tactfully respond to opposing viewpoints. These lessons help develop students into citizens for our participatory democracy.

At East Coweta High School, the civics lessons were ceased. Concerned that the content of student editorials might offend some people, Principal Derek Pitts pulled the plug on the student newspaper. Roughly 500 copies of the September issue of *Smoke Signals* were taken by the administration, mainly due to the content of two opinion columns. One was a satirical column modeled after 18th-century essayist Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" that suggested the bottom of the class be euthanized. Another was a column in which the paper's managing editor criticized the school's beauty contest, questioning its value in education.

Not surprisingly, both pieces spurred some reaction at the school --- definitely the intention of any column writer. The discontent it sparked created a great educational opportunity for the entire student body.

Deeply offended at the mere suggestion, despite its satire, of euthanization of students? Upset because being named the school beauty queen is your yearly goal? Then formulate your thoughts, talk to other students, teachers and administrators, do some research supporting your stance, and write a response piece for the next issue.

In an era of No Child Left Behind and the standardization of education, the high school newspaper creates a rare forum where students can actually develop ideas and test their critical thinking skills. Writing a column in the newspaper requires students to thoughtfully craft their opinions, showcase them to the student body and be prepared for criticism of their viewpoints.

Instead of a lesson in critical thinking, the actions of Pitts showed East Coweta students that viewpoints different from

the mainstream should not be tolerated. Instead of learning how to develop and express their viewpoints in a democracy, they learned that critical thinking is stifled if it differs from the authority's viewpoint.

To his credit, Pitts recently reinstated the newspaper and vowed not to interfere with future publications, instead encouraging the new Smoke Signals adviser to set up a committee of teachers and students to help her with decisions regarding content. The ultimate decision will be in the hands of the adviser.

But unfortunately, the damage from such a brash reaction is often irreversible, at least in the short term. The students and adviser already know what line not to cross. They may stop themselves from pursuing issues and viewpoints contrary to the administration. Self-censorship is just as bad, if not worse, than administrative censorship as students discourage themselves from developing their own viewpoints for fear of rejection or punishment.

Meanwhile, former Smoke Signals managing editor Caitlyn VanOrden, robbed of free speech at her school, has rejected Pitts' offer of reinstatement and instead is taking control of her ideas. Besides having her column published in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the ambitious teenager has set up a Facebook site called "Let Freedom Ring for Smoke Signals" and is hosting a First Amendment rally at the Newnan courthouse square on Sunday from 1 to 5 p.m. At least for one student at East Coweta, the civics lesson continues.

**Joe Dennis** is director of the Georgia Scholastic Press Association, based out of the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia.

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