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SAN LUIS OBISPO HIGH SCHOOL *SLO EXPRESSIONS* NEWSPAPER CONTROVERSY
May 10, 2017

The [May edition of *SLO Expressions* magazine](#), a student publication at San Luis Obispo High School, contained a feature article about the LGBTQ+ community at the high school and a controversial cover page depicting two female students kissing. In response, a teacher submitted a [letter to the editor](#) that objected to the feature article. The article and the editorial letter have generated an avalanche of responses from staff and members of our community. Therefore, we feel the need to respond on behalf of the District and the Board of Education.

Few issues expose our national divide more starkly than the conflict over how to deal with sexual orientation in public schools. Advocacy groups on both sides are working hard to promote their perspective in the schools – or at least to prevent the other side from promoting theirs. In light of these passionate differences, it is important to reaffirm that public schools belong to all. The role of school officials, therefore, is to be fair, honest brokers of a dialogue that involves all stakeholders and seeks the common good. Under the First Amendment, all sides have the right to express their points of view, and sometimes there is no option that will satisfy all parties.

A bedrock principle underlying the First Amendment is that the government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea offensive or disagreeable. As a District, we understand that students do not shed their First Amendment rights at school and we respect the rights of our students to speak on controversial topics. We applaud the high school's commitment to open dialogue and a free exchange of ideas in its student newspaper. We celebrate this inclusive campus where students feel safe physically, socially, and emotionally. We are proud of this inclusive culture, not only on our campus, but within our community as well.

"I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

...Voltaire biographer Evelyn Hall

In a similar manner, we acknowledge the right of our staff to voice their opinions. Employees, likewise, do not shed their First Amendment rights simply because they work for the school district. Employees and other community members have the right to submit letters to the editor, and the newspaper's general rule is to print all letters received. In February 2017, the school board released the probationary teacher in question on the recommendation of the site principal, so he will not be returning for the upcoming school year. Nevertheless, his May 9th letter to the editor was published in order to respect the rights of staff to share their opinions on controversial ideas.

Democracy is messy, but this is a teachable moment, one we hope can be embraced as a learning opportunity. Let this be a moment in which we passionately share our opinions but remain respectful of one another. Now, more than ever, civil discourse must be the heartbeat of education. It is our sincere hope that the democratic value of civil discourse is exemplified with mutual respect and honest dialogue throughout our community's conversation on this controversial yet important topic.

Religious liberty and freedom of expression are inalienable rights for all, guaranteed by the First Amendment. The very purpose of the First Amendment is to safeguard all individuals' rights from the actions of majorities and governments. We have a civic responsibility to respect these rights for others, including those with whom we strongly disagree.

The District is deeply committed to educating our students by allowing free inquiry and the exchange of ideas. We understand the value that robust debate lends to the education process, including the exchange of controversial opinions. We also want *all* of our students and their families to feel safe and welcomed at all of our campuses and facilities, regardless of factors such as sexual orientation, gender, religion, or political beliefs. This recent example illustrates the challenges inherent in defending the principles of our nation's Constitution.

School districts are limited by federal and state law from regulating speech in a student newspaper such as *SLO Expressions*. School officials only have the authority to regulate the content of student publications so that it conforms to the "professional standards of English and journalism" and to ensure that the content of the speech is not prohibited by law. It's also important to remember that views expressed in student publications, whether by students or others who submit letters to the student editors, do not necessarily reflect the views of the school board or the District.

We encourage a robust debate of these issues in a manner that promotes mutual respect. This is always a challenge given controversial topics, while maintaining our mission to ensure that every student excels academically, builds character, and is safe and welcomed at school.

Despite the disparate viewpoints surrounding this issue, we encourage San Luis Obispo High School students, staff, and community to engage in respectful discourse and to model an environment where impassioned issues and viewpoints can be discussed freely.

Respectfully,



Eric Prater, Ed.D.
District Superintendent



Leslie O'Connor, Principal
San Luis Obispo High School