

EMMAUS SCHOOL PAPER'S EDITORIAL BANNED

Morning Call

The East Penn School District superintendent this week squashed a high school newspaper editorial that accused a school board member of cursing at a student reporter and bad-mouthing the newspaper.

Staffers at *The Stinger*, the Emmaus High School newspaper, said they complied with Superintendent Alrita Morgan's order not to run the editorial critical of school board member Mary Lou Stefanko.

But they said they are upset that the school administration interfered with an editorial decision.

"I was really angry," said Eric Doviak, *The Stinger's* opinion page editor. "My gut reaction was to run it anyway, despite the censorship. But if we run it, we could risk losing the whole issue."

The newspaper's adviser, teacher J.F. Pirro, said high school Principal George Anderson told him the administration would prohibit the 2,000 issues from being distributed in the school if the editorial appeared.

"Everybody that put all that work into (the issue) would lose what they did," Doviak said.

The editorial, which was obtained by *The Morning Call*, accuses Stefanko, former president of the school board, of being "unprofessional," rude and not cooperative with student staffers when they call for comment.

The issue, which was produced at *The Morning Call* yesterday under the Student Newspaper Advisory Program (SNAP), is due to be released in the schools early next week.

Student editors are leaving white space in the editorial's place and running a note in large print saying that the superintendent ordered the editorial not be run, Doviak said. Student staffers voted unanimously yesterday to run the note.

Stefanko last night called the accusations in the editorial "lies" and "twisting of facts."

She also questioned the SNAP program and furnished a copy of a letter she sent to the superintendent earlier this month. The letter asked that information about SNAP, including the district's contract with *The Morning Call*, be furnished to the school board.

In the SNAP program, students are trained in graphics/design, computer typesetting and photography. They use the Call facilities, technical equipment and professional guidance to prepare their publications. *Morning Call* employees, however, do not control editorial content in the student newspapers.

Stefanko also raised questions in the Jan. 7 letter to Morgan about how *The Stinger* is run under Pirro.

"Is it clear to the students that as a publicly funded school newspaper, the *Stinger* does not fall in the same category as a free enterprise publication?" she asked in the letter. "Is it understood that *The Stinger* is funded at public expense?"

Anderson estimated that the district spends about \$10,000 annually to produce *The Stinger*, which last May won top honors of all student newspapers in *The Morning Call's* SNAP program.

Despite her concerns with the student newspaper, Stefanko said last night that she did not ask or influence the superintendent or anyone else to pull the editorial about her.

Morgan said she and Anderson made the decision without any outside influence.

Morgan and Anderson said they had a right to “stop any publication of material that would be harmful to individuals or that would disrupt the school environment or is not in the best interest of students.”

They stopped the editorial, Morgan said, because they are working on a solution to the students’ concerns.

“I do have some meetings set up to try to come to a resolution to the concerns that have been expressed,” Morgan said. “If they write it now, it doesn’t help to get a resolution for either side.

“I don’t think you’d call that censorship. I think you’d call that making a decision for the best resolution to the problem.”

But Doviak, a senior, said the administration and Stefanko had enough time to solve the problem. The editorial initially was slated to run in the Dec. 8 issue. Students sent a letter to Stefanko along with a copy of the editorial last month and asked her to meet and discuss the dispute, Doviak said.

If Stefanko refused, Doviak said, she was told the editorial would appear in next week’s issue. Doviak said he hasn’t heard from Stefanko.

“If they were arranging meetings, why haven’t they contacted us?” asked Doviak, whose mother, Francine Doviak, has been a vocal critic of East Penn School Board members. “Why did they pull it at the last minute? They did this deliberately. We could not consult legal advice or anything.”

Students were told Monday that the editorial would be pulled, Doviak said.

Jennifer Waddell, a Stinger staff writer and daughter of Eyer Junior High School Principal Michael Waddell, said Stefanko refused to answer questions and cursed at her when she called her for comment on a story about teacher contract negotiations.

“She accused me of trying to make trouble,” Waddell said. “When I told her we were not making trouble, she said, ‘the hell you’re not.’ Coming from a school board president, it was kind of shocking, I thought.”

Waddell said the conversation with Stefanko made her cry. The editorial should not have been pulled, she said.

“If they didn’t have anything to hide, they wouldn’t have ordered us to pull it,” she said.

Lee Bannister, who resigned as editor in chief of the newspaper last week, said he left the paper, in part, because of the conflict with Stefanko.

“Mrs. Stefanko seems to have a vendetta against us, and this issue troubles me a lot,” he said.

Stefanko told him “more or less that the newspaper program wasn’t worth it and she had serious doubts about it. She thought our adviser was playing too much of a part and we were echoing his opinions.”

Bannister said that’s not the case.

Doviak said he plans to contact the Washington, D.C.-based Student Press Law Center, a non-profit group that offers free legal advice to student journalists.

Mike Hiestand, a lawyer for the center, said yesterday it's unclear whether the school administration had the right to yank the editorial. A 1988 Supreme Court decision, *Hazelwood School District vs. Kuhlmeier*, made it much easier for school officials to censor school-sponsored student newspapers, he said.

School officials can censor when it's "reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns," he said.

"It's a horrible law," Hiestand said, "because it's so vague."

But East Penn may be exempt from the Hazelwood ruling, Hiestand said, if students in the past controlled content of the newspaper without interference from school officials. Both Anderson and Pirro said the administration has not attempted to change editorial content in the past.

If Hazelwood does not apply, school administrators would have a tougher time if they wanted to pull material. They would have to prove, Hiestand said, that "material and substantial disruption" to school activities would occur.

Pirro said he thought the Hazelwood case allows the administration to pull the editorial. He said he doesn't agree with the law, or the administration's decision.

"But we follow the law," said Pirro, who has a master's degree in journalism from Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism and is a former college newspaper editor in chief.

"I have been taught to obey the wishes of my elders or my superiors. That's the way I've been raised, and that's the way I will raise my students, inasmuch as I raise them."