



Mr. Gabe Carmona, Principal  
North Paulding High School  
300 N. Paulding  
Dallas, Georgia 30132

Dear Mr. Carmona:

As organizations and individuals dedicated to protecting the First Amendment right of free expression, we are deeply concerned by recent news reports that at least two students at North Paulding High School have been severely disciplined for circulating a photo of a crowded hallway, raising awareness of concerns they have regarding the health and safety of themselves and their peers as they return to school during a global pandemic. While pleased to hear that some of the suspensions have been rescinded, we are further disturbed by reports that an announcement was made over the school intercom cautioning specifically against casting the school in a negative light and sharing information with the news media. These actions raise serious First Amendment issues, which are only exacerbated by the lasting concerns students and teachers may have about their health and safety this school year.

In its landmark *Tinker* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court made clear that students in school have important First Amendment rights that protect their ability to talk about and share information with others, particularly about matters of public concern. “Students in school, as well as out of school,” the Court said, “are ‘persons’ under our Constitution. They are possessed of fundamental rights which the State must respect....” *Tinker v. Des Moines Indep. Cmty. Sch. Dist.*, 393 U.S. 503, 511 (1969).

Under *Tinker* — the law of the land for more than 50 years — school officials can only restrict non-school-sponsored student speech that takes place on school grounds when the speech is unlawful or seriously disruptive to normal school activities. This photo falls into neither of those categories.

While the school district’s policy against the use of cellphone and other telecommunications devices - which itself raises significant Constitutional concerns - denotes as “inappropriate material” any speech that “causes disruption to the District, its employees or students,” the student’s speech in this case was itself not disruptive. Rather, the photo in question accurately shows the condition of the hallways at NPHS at the time the photo was snapped. If this exact photo were distributed in any other moment it would raise no concerns at all. The scene it depicts is, for better or worse, now a normal school day at NPHS in 2020.

That at least one student was reportedly given a five day out-of-school suspension when the school district’s own discipline policy calls for a progressive discipline structure starting with administrative conference or in-school suspensions indicates that it is the content of the photo, and not the students’ alleged conduct violation, that is considered inappropriate to the school. This is underscored by the subsequent warning given over the intercom system that “there will be consequences for anyone who sends things out” that shows the school in a negative light.

1608 Rhode Island Ave. NW Suite 211 Washington, DC 20036  
202-785-5450 splc.org

While we understand that emotions around school reopening decisions are charged and that you have faced significant criticism for decisions outside of your control, students, teachers and staff nevertheless have the right to speak accurately and lawfully about their school day, even when that speech may be unflattering to the school. Instead of addressing these concerns, NPHS has sought to impose harsh penalties against those who speak out and chill the speech of others who may have similar concerns. Unconstitutionally prohibiting students from speaking about the conditions of the school does not change the conditions of the school or the concerns they have; it only fosters mistrust and fear. This seems all about shooting the messengers. The reality is that it's 2020 and those messengers with their new speech tools aren't going away.

We ask that you reaffirm NPHS's commitment to protecting the First Amendment rights of students and teachers by rescinding any and all suspensions relating to the posting or sharing of this or similar photographs and publicly committing to amend the school district's policy restricting student speech which contravenes the well-established *Tinker* standard. We would be happy to assist you in revising this policy to ensure that it complies with the law.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Hadar Harris  
Executive Director  
Student Press Law Center

cc: Dr. Brian Otott, Superintendent  
Paulding County Board of Education

The following organizations and individuals co-sign this letter (in alphabetical order):

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Scholastic Journalism Division  
Brechner Center for Freedom of Information, University of Florida  
Center for Scholastic Journalism, Kent State University  
Defending Rights & Dissent  
Electronic Frontier Foundation  
Foundation for Individual Rights in Education  
Freedom of the Press Foundation  
High School Journalism Institute, Indiana University  
Journalism Education Association  
National Coalition Against Censorship  
National Press Photographers Association  
PEN America  
Press Freedom Defense Fund (a program of First Look Media)  
Quill and Scroll Honor Society  
Radio Television Digital News Association  
Society of Professional Journalists  
SPLC Action Fund

1608 Rhode Island Ave. NW Suite 211 Washington, DC 20036  
202-785-5450 splc.org

Tully Center for Free Speech, Syracuse University  
Woodhull Freedom Foundation  
Samantha Barry, Editor-in-chief, Glamour Magazine\*  
Prof. John Bowen, Kent State University\*  
Prof. David W. Bulla, Augusta University\*  
Prof. Ed Madison, University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication\*  
Prof. Adam Maksl, Indiana University Souther\*  
Prof. Debra Reddin van Tuyl, Augusta University\*  
Prof. Erica Salkin, Whitworth University\*  
Christine Wakerman, Winstead PC\*  
Prof. Bradley Wilson, Midwestern State University\*

\*Signing in a personal capacity. Affiliation for identification purposes only.