

Statement of Rob Wells, Ph.D., in Support of HB 1015
Student Journalism in High Schools
On Behalf of the Society of Professional Journalists
Northwest Arkansas Chapter



Before the House Education Committee, Arkansas State Legislature, Feb. 28, 2019.

Introduction:

Chairman Cozart, Vice Chair Murdock, thank you very much for letting me appear here today. My name is Rob Wells, and I live in Fayetteville. I was a news reporter and editor for 26 years with the Associated Press, Bloomberg News, Dow Jones and the Wall Street Journal, where I was deputy bureau chief of the Journal's Washington DC bureau. I have been teaching journalism since 2010 at the University of Maryland, University of South Carolina and now at the University of Arkansas. I have a Ph.D. in Journalism Studies. I am appearing here on my own behalf and am also representing the Northwest Arkansas Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists.

Time is tight, so let me make a few quick points and I'll be happy to answer any questions here or offline if you wish.

First: High school journalism helps develop skills for the modern workforce.

Second: High school journalism classes can help us battle the spread of what they call "fake news."

Third: I have some suggestions on the unfunded mandate issue.

Unfunded Mandate

With this bill, there's an elephant in the room and it's called an unfunded mandate. My perspective is this was not an issue before the Board of Education acted in July 2018. That board decision was an expression of misplaced priorities and you have the power to fix it. Schools already have curriculum developed since journalism has been on the books since 1984. Rural schools that need help can make use of distance learning options via the web to help out the teachers.

Having said that, I would like the committee to consider other avenues as well. Journalism could be a writing option within the English writing requirements. As I will discuss below, high school students tell me and others they learn more about writing when doing journalism. Journalism absolutely could be an option in civics and history. We write the first draft of history, as you know.

I wanted to share something about STEM education. Modern journalism courses work with STEM education. Journalism provides the interface between numbers and human stories. I teach data journalism, I teach reporters how to code. Data journalism is the growth area in the journalism field. We all know of Act 187 of 2015, which mandated computer science classes in high school. This is fantastic. Young people need to learn how to handle data. Journalism courses can help with this.

I wanted to share with you some research. Jack Dvorak, a journalism professor at Indiana University, has compiled significant research documenting the improved academic performance of students who work on high school newspapers. He wrote a 1994 book *Journalism Kids Do Better: What Research Tells Us about High School Journalism*. Here is 476 pages of research showing us "journalism students do better on grades, ACT tests and AP exams ... students who had worked on a newspaper or yearbook staff in high school did better in high school and college than students who had had no journalism experience."

And there's a 2014 study in *Journalism and Mass Communications Quarterly* that describes the "significant positive effects" that high school journalism offers college students. The study says, "Participation in such activities prepares students for their undergraduate careers, and these college experiences have a significant effect on the success of the university graduates once they move into the job market." (Lee Becker et al., "The Effects of Pre-University Study of Journalism on Entry to the Job Market," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (2014): 344–56)

I am working with Northwest Arkansas high school students on the weekends on a media outreach program called the Lemke Journalism Program. These bright young people tell me the following:

—High school journalism students really learn how to write in a journalism class. They learn to love writing.

—High school journalism students learn workplace skills, like how to act professionally with an obnoxious colleague. They are learning basic human resources management.

—High school journalism students learn business skills. They learn marketing and finance - how to raise money for the paper, how to operate a project with limited funds.

—High school journalism students learn about broader issues in society. They learn about civics, history, politics by tuning into the news.

Workforce

Journalism classes aren't just training newspaper reporters. They do so much more.

We all want to train our Arkansas high school students for college and the workforce so they can compete at the highest levels. We can all agree on that.

We have all heard the terms project-based learning, problem solving, critical thinking, multi-disciplinary learning. This is what happens in journalism classes — we have to deal with issues in politics, sports, business, crime and the environment.

The benefits are significant. Journalism students communicate effectively in our modern digital environment. They can express themselves professionally, concisely and clearly. Journalism forces this discipline on you.

If you're in an office and you need someone to edit and post a video to the company's website, who would you ask? Find a journalism student. They do that all of the time. Today's journalism courses are all about technological literacy, even at the high school level.

High school journalism helps provide the skillset for a modern workforce. I can tell you my students are working for newspapers and they are doing corporate public relations and they are becoming lawyers.

Literacy

One of the reasons I drove down here today is we face a crisis in this country with the spread of disinformation. Our country is under attack from foreign state propaganda machines. We need to have an educated and media-literate population. High school journalism classes are our best hope for this. I think we can all agree that we need voters who can discern real from fake news. Journalism courses teach that. Simply put, journalism helps inform people and makes them better citizens. James Madison wrote about this extensively in the Federalist Papers.

I've attached a few research articles on this link that describe the benefits of high school journalism.
<https://bit.ly/2Ef64Pq>

For these reasons and many others, I strongly urge you to support Rep. Mayberry's efforts to make high school journalism a part of our state's curriculum.

Thank you very much.

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