

CSPAA NOTES



By
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Circumstances of private school media

One October afternoon, it came: the packet.

If you're a veteran journalism adviser or student, you'll know what "the packet" refers to. The packet from your state or national journalism organization, CSPAA, Quill and Scroll, JEA or NSPA. The packet with your media ratings or critique.

Validation of a job well done, things to work on, perhaps some very nice kudos. Constructive pointers that will make your teaching and advising stronger. Make your yearbook or newspaper better. Starting points for discussions with your staff on things to do better, differently, things to think about. You hope.

That particular October afternoon, it did arrive. When I got back to my office, I sorted through the rest of the day's mail, reserving 'the packet' for last so I'd have time to go over it unhurriedly. I chose to view the critique or rating before sharing with my editor or staff members, to allow time to process what was presented, and, in some cases, prepare for the students' reactions.

This afternoon, after a quick glance, I truly wondered if I had received the wrong mailing. But, no, the cover clearly stated *Marksman*. That was us. And we were only nine points saved from earning the lowest rating by this organization.

Slowly, I summoned up the courage to go forward and read the comments. Obviously, we had inadvertently violated — severely — basic journalism principles. But, so many to cause our score to drop so precipitously? I really couldn't believe that my staffers (who had produced Gold Crown and Pacemaker yearbooks in previous years) could be so far off base. Could we have missed the mark so much?

It took me a good half hour to go through the multi-paged booklet. And, to be fair, this critique judge was thorough. She or he had certainly gone through the book in exhaustive fashion. But, what alarmed me so much was that she or he had completely ignored the special considerations that I had taken painstaking care to inform the organization about.

Those special considerations necessitated by our being a private school. Not a public school. These were things we had to do because it was part of our school's heritage. Things that were a part of who we are.

And, because this particular judge was so "turned off" by our senior pages — one page was given to each senior in the class section, a 49-year tradition — and we actually (gasp) dedicated the yearbook to someone — another 49-year tradition that I'll explain later — he or she really just gave no credit whatsoever to the good things the book had going for it: a contemporary, unexpected theme for an anniversary year, a cover that very nicely spoke to the theme, solid copy (researched, edited, and re-written many times, under the tutelage of a nationally-known writing expert) and clean, contemporary layouts which reflected the editor's goal of emphasizing full-page photographs and striking white space. Severe criticism dotted the whole critique, colored, I imagine, by these two areas' inclusion.

It was disheartening for me, and, I was sure, at best, it would be confusing to my students.

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I was delighted when Mary Kay Downes, president of the Columbia Scholastic Press Advisers Association, invited me to join that group's board this fall as first vice president. I have a long involvement in scholastic press associations, as an adviser oh-so-many years ago in my "first career" (in a public school) and for nearly two decades as a publishing company sales representative.

Now, in my second teaching career at St. Mark's School of Texas, a private all-boys school in Dallas, I'm enjoying this next phase of teaching and advising, perhaps with the added bonus of (too many) years of seasoning. It's been a great pleasure to return to the classroom, and we've enjoyed participating in CSPAA, NSPA, and the Interscholastic League Press Conference in Austin for the past seven years.

It was an easy decision to accept Mary Kay's invitation to join the board. At

the first meeting, it dawned on me that among all these accomplished advisers with whom I served, I was the only one currently advising in a private school. And, as the discussion turned to this article, it was clear to Mary Kay that perhaps I could address some of the particular concerns that I had found when private schools' publications were being critiqued and rated from scholastic press organizations.

The past seven years have given me keen insight into the particular situations that private school publications must be produced within, so it was easy for me to agree to take this assignment.

Here are some things I've encountered as a private school adviser that must be factored into our publications:

1. Marketing, image tools. Private schools' yearbooks and newspapers are frequently used as marketing tools by the school. In our case, the offices of Development, Admission, and Alumni Affairs all display both the newspaper and yearbook. Alumni officials take copies of both as they meet with alums around the country. The Admission Office frequently includes the newspaper in information packets to prospective families.

2. Honoring traditions. Many private schools' publications must address longstanding traditions, such as coverage and content, dedication, baby pictures, among others that must be addressed in the yearbook or newspaper.

3. Financial differences. Many private schools' publications are not sold; they are included in tuition or enrollment fees. That is our situation. We do not have to target the teen consumer to attract his dollar. That allows us much greater freedom in design, content, and coverage.

4. Visibility in the community. The visibility within the school community can be much greater in some private schools. In our school, parents are very active and a viable presence on campus. They pick up our newspaper, take it home and actually read it, not just glance at it. I frequently am stopped on campus by a parent commenting on something he or she has read. That surprised me at first, and it certainly makes my staff members and me much more cognizant of the scope of our newspaper's consumption.

Wait, there's more!

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