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Book Review: Private Schools and Student Media

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Within the United States, private school students comprise about 10% of the K-12 student population. Private schools have specific mission statements and values, including both faith-based and secular institutions. With independent funding and governance, private schools are not subject to the same level of government regulations that public schools experience, but they are also not entirely free from regulation. As such, private schools present unique opportunities and challenges to facilitating student media production.

In *Private Schools and Student Media*, Erica Salkin, an associate professor of communication studies at Whitworth University, explores student media opportunities at K-12 private schools in the United States. The author specifically focuses on exploring the following questions:

- Do private schools embrace student media and if so, what kinds?
- How is student expression regulated or restrained in private schools?
- How do student media advisers in private schools approach their work?

Before exploring these questions, the author provides context through a discussion of the role of private schools in modern education, student media as a whole, and freedom of expression within private schools. Then, the author explores several studies related to U.S. private schools and student media including two national surveys of student media advisers and two content analyses on the current state of student media. Finally, the author shares the stories of individual student media advisers through interview transcripts and provides recommendations for private schools and student media going forward.

Setting the Stage

Chapter 1 establishes the goal of the book, including the questions that will be explored and a summary of future chapters. Additionally, Salkin makes it clear the value of student media outlets in challenging students “to engage in critical information gathering, production, and editing to create a product for a public audience” (p. 2).

Context and History

Chapter 2 begins with defining private schools as schools that are privately funded and managed but “not entirely free of government regulation” (p. 6). Private schools can include Catholic (36%), conservative Christian (13%), faith-based/affiliated (10%), faith-based/unaffiliated (16%), and nonsectarian (24%) schools, but do not include charter schools or homeschooled students. A brief history of private schools in the United States is provided, as well as a review of research discussing the private school academic effect, which is debated among researchers. Though the research on benefits of attending private school is mixed, private schools are at least comparable to public schools and comprise about 10% of the K-12 student population. As such, the author argues that private schools should be an active component within K-12 educational research.

Chapter 3 begins with a brief history of high school student media in the United States, starting with the first-recorded student newspaper at the Public Latin School in Philadelphia, published in 1777. Through a brief overview of relevant laws, the author notes that public schools must balance students’ First Amendment rights to free expression with discipline and

pedagogical needs. Student media currently has a “vigorous presence in public high schools” (p. 23) and includes a variety of formats such as newspapers, magazines, student-run radio stations, student broadcast clubs, student media websites, and yearbooks. Benefits of participation in student media opportunities include civic education and engagement, improved communication skills, increased self-efficacy, media literacy skills development, and writing for an authentic audience. As such, student media opportunities are a “powerful tool in any school’s toolbox toward providing a strong and comprehensive education to its students” (p. 31).

Chapter 4 examines the role of free expression in private schools, which are not subject to the same “constitutional obligations” (p. 31) as public schools. The chapter contains a brief overview of important court cases and laws related to the constitutional rights of public school student speech. Salkin then asks if student free speech rights should or could extend into private schools. While there are arguments on both sides, it would be difficult to extend these rights to private school students. Salkin explains the top challenges including state actor doctrine, the carrot and stick approach to federal funding, and the variation between individual states and private school regulation with a recommendation toward a proactive approach to addressing free speech rights in private schools.

Research Studies

Chapter 5 reports findings from two surveys on private school student media offerings. The first survey focused on the presence of student media activities and opportunities and included questions on school demographics, student media activities, and adviser experience. The second survey focused more on student media advisers and included questions on the adviser’s educational and professional background, school demographics, the structure of student media activities, and the adviser’s perspectives on advising and student media.

Chapter 6 reports findings from content analyses that explored text-based data from private school websites and student newspaper websites. The first content analysis focused on the existence of student media activities and how they were marketed on private school websites. The second content analysis analyzed a random sample of publications from student newspaper websites including information on the topic, style, subject, possible multimedia elements, inclusion of multiple sources, and whether or not the article covered a “controversial” topic.

The end of Chapter 6 provides some common themes that emerge from looking at the four studies as a whole. Private schools provide similar opportunities to public schools for student newspapers and yearbooks, but student media creation at private schools have room to grow. Advisers tend to have high levels of experience but low levels of involvement in scholastic journalism organizations. Advisers described similar experiences, with most indicating strong relationships with school administration, including high levels of involvement in content creation and approval. Additionally, while advisers did not express high levels of censorship, they did note pressure to conform to school mission and values and often described actively discussing controversial topics with students before publication.

Chapter 7 includes excerpts from nine interviews with student media advisers, including their “elevator pitch” for student media opportunities. The common thread from these interviews was that “Student media is good for students, and good for schools” (p. 101).

Conclusion

Chapter 8 describes student media creation as “thoughtful listening, thinking, writing, and editing” (p. 106) and provides students with opportunities to develop critical thinking, civic engagement and participation, information and media literacy, listening and observation skills, and more. Because of the academic, intellectual, and social benefits to student media creation, Salkin argues that student media opportunities can help private schools “further their missions and goals of producing well-educated young people” (p. 107).

Private Schools and Student Media is written for a scholarly audience, particularly scholars of communication, education, journalism, and media studies interested in exploring student media creation at the K-12 student level. The chapters on context and history provide background knowledge for someone unfamiliar with the topic, and the research studies provide an exploration into the current state of K-12 student media within private schools. Throughout, Salkin makes the case for private schools to support student media opportunities as valuable to furthering their mission of developing students.