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**COMMENTS IN SUPPORT OF 17-H-5550 – AN ACT RELATING TO EDUCATION –
STUDENT JOURNALISTS’ FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION ACT
April 4, 2017**

The ACLU of Rhode Island wishes to express its wholehearted support for this bill, which would recognize the importance of encouraging student journalism and guaranteeing to students certain basic rights to freedom of the press.

This bill would reverse an unfortunate 1998 U.S. Supreme Court decision that gave school officials tremendous discretion to censor student newspapers. In that case, the Court allowed public high school administrators at a suburban St. Louis school to censor from the school’s student newspaper stories concerning teen pregnancy and the effects of divorce on children. The decision had a chilling effect on student journalism throughout the country. Under this bill, a free and responsible student press would be able to flourish in Rhode Island, as it has in at least nine¹ other states, including Massachusetts, that have adopted similar laws.

The legislation contains reasonable safeguards, and makes clear that it does not protect libelous, obscene or disruptive speech. In addition, journalism advisors will still help guide student editors in preparation of the newspaper, as is currently the case.

Students do not volunteer for extra-curricular activities like the school newspaper with the desire to print four-letter words. They are responsible individuals who deserve to be free from inappropriate censorship by administration officials. This bill guarantees to those students the respect they deserve for their work. Most importantly, it recognizes that we cannot expect them to become independent-thinking and responsible adults if censorship is allowed to be the norm in the school setting. In short, H-5550 would ensure that the First Amendment that students learn about in their civics classes does not consist of empty words stripped of meaning in the school setting.

We urge the Committee’s support of this bill, and in doing so, it will demonstrate the appreciation and respect we should have for the students who engage in this commendable exercise of freedom of the press.

¹ Arkansas, California, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, North Dakota, Oregon.