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Washington State Representative Dave Upthegrove is sponsoring a bill to provide freedom of the press to high school and college journalists in Washington. As public hearing dates for the bill rapidly approach, Upthegrove sat down with J-Ideas' Gerry Appel to explain the legislation (HB 1307) and its significance. The following is an excerpt from that interview:

Q: Why is this bill important?

A: This bill is important for a number of reasons. First of all it's important to protect the first amendment rights for everyone -- whether you are young or old -- whether you are a student or a non-student. That freedom of speech is essential to the success of a democracy. A second reason that bill is important is that it promotes civic education. Students need to learn about their rights and responsibilities as citizens and there is no better way to learn than to put those into practice at the high school and college level.

I want this bill to accomplish a number of things. Number one, I want us to have a society with greater debate, greater sharing of ideas where everybody has free expression and freedom of the press. We have a better healthier democracy and a better society when that happens. Secondly, I want young people to be educated about their rights and responsibilities -- where they come from how to exercise them. And if we are not allowing them to learn through experience, we are restricting their ability to have the most effective learning opportunities.

Q: How are civics and journalism intertwined?

A: I see journalism as the application of civics. It's taking and putting into action your rights as a citizen by expressing your views and by sharing information with the public. The great journalist, Edward R. Murrow, once said, "A nation of sheep begets a government of wolves," and as a journalist he recognized that the relationship between educating the public ... having an informed public and having an accountable government. If people don't understand their rights and responsibilities and they don't have access to information about what the government is doing, then they don't have the tools to hold government accountable.

We've seen more incidents in the state of Washington and around the country where there has been censorship of student media by the school officials at the high school level for issues such as being critical of the school administration -- not a valid reason for censorship. I think that there seems to be a comfort level, more so at the college level perhaps because of the age of the students, but it's absolutely vital that if we're going to embrace First Amendment rights, if we're going to have free press, free expression, and if we're going to educate the next generation, then that has to start at the high school level. That's when students are forming their beliefs. That's when we have an opportunity to let students put into practice First Amendment protections, and it's where the most problems have occurred.

Q: How does this bill protect teachers?

A: The bill protects teachers and schools by exempting them from all liability whatsoever for the content of those newspapers. The liability has shifted from the school and teachers to the students. Schools and teachers should not be worried in the least bit about being liable for that content.

School officials should be in favor of the bill because when we have freedom of the student press, historically we have seen better quality journalism and better quality school

papers. You look around the country and some of the finest college and high school papers are those in which the students are able to take on that responsibility.

Q: How does this bill specifically make students better citizens?

A: The bill makes students better citizens by allowing them to put into action their rights as citizens. By doing so, they are learning about those rights and responsibilities and they are learning through practice how to exercise those rights and responsibilities -- we need that in the next generations. The Knight Foundation report showed that 49 percent of high school students thought it was ok for the government to censor the news, and it showed a lack of appreciation for First Amendment rights. If we are in a society where the next generation of young people coming up into leadership positions, into government and politics and business, don't have an appreciation of our constitutional rights, it puts our whole democracy at risk. This is a way to help ensure that that next generation has an appreciation and knows how to apply those rights and freedoms.

Far too many young people now are exiting high school without a strong foundation in civics. Far too many young people don't understand their rights and responsibilities, where they came from, and how to exercise them. When you have more young people who can name the winner of American Idol than the speaker of the House of Representatives, you have a problem. When you have two thirds, or more, of young people who don't quite know how they feel about the First Amendment, then you have a problem.

The Constitution doesn't say you have freedom of the press and freedom of speech unless you're a student. It doesn't say you have freedom of press and freedom of speech unless you're young. Those are fundamental rights at the core of a democracy and a free society -- and to limit those, to any degree, without a very rational reason runs counter to a free society. Some of the most creative ideas and best thought -- new ideas and new approaches come from high school students and college students. Those are laboratories

for democracy and for learning and for new ideas. So students should seize upon the freedoms they have and use them responsibly, but definitely use them.

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