

A student press victory echoes nationwide

How Virginia high schoolers said ‘no’ to their district and ‘yes’ to First Amendment rights



On Nov. 15, Theogony, the student news site at Alexandria City High School in Virginia, received the Student Press Law Center’s (SPLC) National Courage in Journalism award for standing up to administrative interference. The honor was presented at the 2025 National High School Journalism Convention in Nashville.

Theogony’s story

The conflict began in November 2024 when Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) named Principal Alexander Duncan as the editor of Theogony. Previously, all editorial content decisions were made solely by Theogony students. Duncan’s imposition came shortly after Theogony published an installment of its investigative series, “Inside the High School Project,” which prompted multiple meetings with the district’s public relations (PR) team. Theogony staff members were told PR representatives must attend all interviews and receive an updated list of in-progress articles.

Theogony refused.

ACPS specifically appointed administrators above student editors for stories deemed “high interest,” marking the district’s first change to student publications policy in 11 years.

Melanie Kay-Wyatt <melanie.kay-wyatt@acps.k12.va.us>

To: James Libresco <james.libresco@gmail.com>

Cc: Pierrette Finney <pierrette.finney@acps.k12.va.us>, Marcia Jackson <marcia.jackson@acps.k12.va.us>, cdonahue8889@gmail.com, Alexander Duncan <alexander.duncan@acps.k12.va.us>

Tue, Nov 19, 2024 at 4:10 PM

Co-editor-in-chief

Rozalia Finkelstein said that the pressure began after Inside the High School Project revealed staffing changes and controversial decisions.

Dear Mr. Libresco,

As you mentioned in your email, you have met with Principal Duncan regarding your questions on the review process for articles submitted to be published in *Theogony*. As stated in [School Board Policy JP](#), Principal Duncan serves as the editor for student publications at the high school as outlined below:

Responsibilities of the School Principal (Editor)

The school principal is responsible for approving all publications in accordance with School Board policy and his/her judgment and discretion.

Please be advised that this policy has existed in its present state since December 2014. All ACPS employees, including Principal Duncan and me, are required to comply with all School Board policies, and it is my intention to do so. In order to ensure that the approval process mandated by Policy JP runs smoothly and provides ample time for review and approval, Principal Duncan, in his editor role, has documented a review process to manage expectations and ensure that this policy is being complied with according to what is stated, and I completely support his decision.

I am confident that the *Theogony* editors can collaborate with Principal Duncan and your Advisor Ms. Lawson to follow this process and continue with your publishing schedule as planned.

Sincerely,

Dr. Melanie Kay-Wyatt

“During our discussions, the school board and PR team were always vague about which articles they wanted prior restraint for, referring to them as ‘articles of note’ or ‘controversial articles,’” Finkelstein said. “However, what they really wanted was control over articles that critiqued the school district.”

Under the First Amendment, Duncan could not have legally

restricted reporting within his role as a principal. However, being classified as “the” editor created a pathway for Duncan to adjust or redirect student work.

Features editor Nadja Duss said the pressure motivated the newsroom to continue publishing.

“We didn’t pause publication or coverage [at the time]. Honestly, the whole situation motivated me because I really wanted to show our community that *Theogony* deserved their support,” Duss said. “We actually produced some of our best articles last year, and we made sure not to let the censorship take over our class.”

Duncan resigned in June 2025.

Theogony staff created an action steps document, gathered more than 1,500 verified petition signatures and presented a proposed policy titled “Voices Unbound,” drafted with SPLC support.

Finkelstein said the district rejected *Theogony*’s entire proposal.

“When our district released its proposed update to the policy, it included zero out of the 12 elements of ‘Voices Unbound’ that [*Theogony*] requested,” Finkelstein said. “It also provided no protections against retaliation for advisers and student journalists.”

The ACPS school board is still reviewing *Voices Unbound*. Finkelstein said that in November, a draft policy was introduced that aligns with *Theogony*’s proposal, but it has not yet been ratified.

