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The Power of Words

When a student walks onto their school's campus they are giving their school the power to regulate their actions. School rules, like laws, exist to protect the student body and to help keep everything running smoothly. However, the school does not always have the power to deliver consequences for students' actions. In 2021, the Supreme Court ruled in the *Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L.* case, where a student was suspended for criticizing the school on Snapchat off campus after failing to make the cheerleading squad, that the school did not have the right to interfere in this instance. But the case left much to be decided in the future and the lines between what schools do and do not have the power to do are still unclear. The First Amendment protects an individual's freedom of expression, and giving schools the power to regulate students' voices off of school property is infringing upon those rights.

The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." In the past, schools have tried to exercise power over what students can say outside of school, violating the First Amendment which should protect every individual's right to express their opinion, including students.

Inside of school, the school has the power to discipline students' actions. Off of school property, it is the parents' responsibility. According to Justice Clarence Thomas on the *Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L.* case, "Schools can regulate speech less often when that speech occurs off campus." However, in order to truly acknowledge the students' First Amendment rights, schools should almost never interfere with students' freedom of expression outside of school.

One common argument that supports school interference is to protect other students and the running of the school. According to the Supreme Court, there are a few instances in which the school may have the right to interfere. One of these is under the *In loco parentis* doctrine, which gives schools the right to regulate actions done off campus when the parents are unable. However, giving parents the right to regulate their child's words outside of school is very different from giving that power to the school and if the school interferes, they will always be violating the First Amendment even if the expressed opinion is interfering with the running of the school.

So when a student steps off of school property, the First Amendment should protect them. Though the lines aren't always clear, a student's freedom of speech and expression should never be controlled by the school. That responsibility lies in the hands of the parents and the students themselves, who should, ideally, consider the effects of their actions on the rest of the world. While every person should have control over what they put out into the world, it's important that they realize how powerful their words can be.

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