

Dear Dr. Thompson and members of the Board of Education,

We are writing regarding Mr. Fletcher's relationship with *Portrait*, the student newspaper of East Lansing High School. Since October, it seems that Mr. Fletcher has had an adversarial relationship with *Portrait*, and despite our many attempts to accommodate his micromanagement of this student extracurricular, we have decided to address this issue in writing and present a list of requests because we feel we have been patient long enough. As senior editors of the newspaper, we wish to leave behind a good foundation for future writers, and while we may not be able to experience the changes we request for very long, we cannot in good conscience continue to let the status quo stand.

To understand the situation better, we will now provide background information on this year's events.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the spring of last year, we were chosen to be co-Editors-in-Chief of *Portrait*. We met several times during the summer to discuss how we would run *Portrait* for the 2014-2015 school year. The previous year's editor wanted *Portrait* to mostly contain dry, serious news articles, and a lot of the time, he would assign to writers a recent news topic. They would then look up existing articles from news sources, and write an article that often repeated what they had read on major news websites (such as CNN, BBC, or Reuters). Writers were also assigned to an area (e.g. "World News" or "Opinion" or "Arts and Entertainment"), and were expected to mainly write articles about topics in those areas. However, this sometimes led to low morale because writers were assigned topics that they weren't necessarily interested in, and the overall writing experience wasn't always enjoyable. We even lost a few veteran writers because they did not enjoy the experience.

As a result, one of our major goals was to improve the writing experience for *Portrait* writers. We have been a lot more flexible on article topics, and have been encouraging writers to conduct interviews as well as write about local and school news issues more. While we still assign topics to writers for important events that no one has volunteered to take on, many writers have commented that they much prefer the current system to last year's, as it allows for more flexibility and more engagement with the issues.

Mr. Fletcher mainly left us alone for the first two months until late October, during the time of the teacher contract disputes. During this time, we published an article in which a young writer mistakenly claimed that teachers weren't being paid at all. The editor who was reviewing the article failed to notice the error. As soon as we found out, we issued a retraction as well as a public apology for our error. We admit that despite the fact that circumstances surrounding that week's issue of *Portrait* were hectic, we, as editors, should have caught the mistake. On our own, we discussed with our advisor the need to have her review the articles before they are published for accuracy.

As a result of this error, Mr. Fletcher asked for prior review of everything we publish, in order to, he said, check for factual accuracy and writing quality. The editors had a meeting with him, and he said he would not censor content. We then began sending articles to Mr. Fletcher before we published them, with the belief that he would

check our facts and point out any grammatical or spelling errors that slipped past us. We also believed that this would be a temporary situation (akin to being placed on probation due to our error, which we considered somewhat unnecessary, but reasonable).

Later, Mr. Fletcher began to do what he said he wouldn't do - censor the content. For example, the word "beer" was taken out of one article, as was the word "sex". We were initially confused, because neither article encouraged students to drink beer and/or have sex, and only mentioned "beer" and "sex" in passing (i.e. beer and sex were not the focal points of the articles). Also, we had written articles on far more controversial topics in previous years (such as marijuana legalization) without administrative intervention. However, we went along with it, as we continued to believe that Mr. Fletcher's prior review would merely just provide us with another set of critical eyes to catch any mistakes we overlooked.

As the year went on, Mr. Fletcher began taking more and more time to review articles, delaying and pushing back release dates of each issue of *Portrait*. In one instance, he took four days to review an issue. We understood that he was busy, but rather than requesting that he change his worsening lateness (which was affecting the perpetually- hectic schedule that all newspapers have), we continued to make accommodations for his request for prior review. He continued to edit for content, and kept suggesting certain topics that he wanted addressed - such as fun quizzes and teacher profiles - after he made his edits, leading us to believe that he was critical not only of our article's contents, but of what we wrote about as well. His lateness also pushed back time-sensitive articles on recent events, meaning that some of the articles we published were essentially irrelevant by the time the paper was handed out.

In late February, a group of male senior students decided to release a "senior rap", which was a diss track that (according to many) seemed to mostly target underclass girls. The administration found out, and a part of their punishment was to write a public apology that would be published in the newspaper. As editors, we were surprised - we welcome letters to the editor, but the way the administrators decided that the apology WILL be published in the student newspaper seemed to treat the student newspaper like an administrative bulletin, especially since they did not first ask us if we would publish it. However, we gave them the benefit of the doubt and assumed that what we perceived to be another instance of administrative micromanagement of the student newspaper was simply an issue of poor word choice.

Shortly after that, Evan Hoopingarner, one of the editors, decided to write an editorial in response to the "senior rap apology", which he felt was weak and half-hearted. Contrary to Mr. Fletcher's claim, he did not criticize the individuals involved; rather, every one of his criticisms were made on direct excerpts from the senior rap apology, such as how they "didn't intend to hurt anyone" and how they wanted to "lead the way for 16, 17, and 18 to follow". We emailed the editorial, along with other articles for this issue (including a time-sensitive feature article encouraging students to go see the Wiz), to Mr. Fletcher for approval.

Here's where things got weird. Mr. Fletcher responded and said that the "articles look ok... except for your letter". He said that it came off "as an attack on the individuals involved in the production of the rap". He also said that the

"outlook on the class of 2015 sounds rather bleak", and wanted Mr. Hoopingarner to "stick with the sentiment that future classes can do better".

We disagreed with him, because all of the criticisms made were of a piece of writing that the administrators themselves wanted published, and especially since this was a clear instance of him censoring content (which he explicitly told the editors he wouldn't do).

However, since we needed the time-sensitive article on The Wiz to be published, we revised the editorial and submitted the new version to him.

A little while later, he sent an email saying "Just read this. Well-written and looks good."

After we got that email, we sent the issue out to be printed. The day was Tuesday, March 25th.

However, on Thursday, we were informed by our advisor that Mr. Fletcher had, in fact, intended that email to be about a different article - one that he had already approved. He was furious that our advisor had sent an article to be printed that he had not approved. He told our advisor that we would have to re-print the issue. We scheduled a meeting with him for Friday morning, where we hoped to finally clear up all the miscommunications that had occurred.

On Friday morning, we went to school early to talk to our advisor, who informed us that she and Mr. Fletcher had had a heated discussion the previous night regarding the publishing of this letter, where he told her he was "not interested in meeting with us". We have NEVER, in our years at the high school, had an administrator cancel a scheduled meeting the night before because he/she was "not interested" in meeting with students. In this heated discussion, he also claimed that "neither Evan nor Stefan ever tried to set up a meeting", which we have proof to the contrary (which will be made available on request). Additionally, this was not the first time he had canceled a scheduled meeting to discuss his relationship with *Portrait*.

Since our principal was refusing to meet with us and our advisor, we, the editors, went to see the Superintendent. We told her everything that happened, and she listened and was attentive. We had no idea what would happen after. That was several weeks ago, and there have been no updates since.

Every article and email conversation mentioned here has been stored and can be made available for you if you want to see for yourself.

LIST OF GRIEVANCES:

In our article about the controversial law passed in Indiana that (according to critics) would allow businesses to discriminate based on religious views, we interviewed students with a diverse set of viewpoints on the issue. Mr. Fletcher removed a direct quote from an interview with a student who supported the law.

In our feature on the recent sexual education controversies at ELHS, we interviewed the teacher who taught the class in question, as a way to provide the teacher with a platform to tell their side of the story. Mr. Fletcher deemed this “inappropriate” and made us remove this from the paper even though the teacher had agreed to be interviewed.

Words such as “beer” and “sex” have been removed from articles. We believe that such words, especially when only referred to in passing, should not be censored. We have enough journalistic integrity to not spread misinformation, or encourage or condone illegal underage activities.

The length of time Mr. Fletcher has taken to review articles is concerning. We believe that if Mr. Fletcher wants us to make accommodations in our established process for his prior review, we don't think it's unreasonable to expect him to do the same and make accommodations for our busy schedule. If he cannot make accommodations, we feel it is unreasonable for him to expect us to do so.

Mr. Fletcher cancelled a scheduled meeting due to him not having "any intention of meeting". Unfortunately, this was not the only time he did not show up to a scheduled meeting. In late October (soon after the incident regarding the teacher contracts article), he contacted us and asked to come to our Monday night meeting to set the record straight and clear up any misunderstandings. He did not show up.

Mr. Fletcher has clearly and consistently censored for content. This is especially concerning because he explicitly mentioned this as something he would not do.

To our knowledge, this is the first time in ELHS' long history of student journalism that ANY administrator has decided to exercise prior review. We acknowledge that we made an error in October, and we understand that Mr. Fletcher is new to the district and thus may have come from a school where the student press was closely monitored and regulated by the administration. However, such a student press environment is not conducive to the culture of East Lansing High School: a place where sometimes-controversial ideas and viewpoints are discussed freely among the student body, and where the student newspaper plays a large role in stimulating conversations between students about important issues.

Prior review seems to be unnecessary - since the misstatement during the teacher contract negotiations, there have not been any factual errors that weren't caught by our advisor (such as a misstatement saying that Pre-AP courses were not in the course catalog), and very few of Mr. Fletcher's edits seem to be about writing style. Rather, the majority of his edits are editing the content of student articles (again, something he explicitly said he would not do in a meeting with the editors), and him commenting on what he wishes we would write about. We question the necessity and purpose of Mr. Fletcher's use of prior review.

ADVERSE IMPACTS

Several writers have quit since Mr. Fletcher's decision to institute a policy of prior review. In addition, the remaining writers, our advisor, and we the editors, now spend a lot of time trying to figure out what we can or can't write about in order to get our articles past this censorship. The morale and writing experience of *Portrait*

writers has been greatly diminished, as has our capacity to enrich the student body through creative and thought-provoking publications.

LIST OF REQUESTS

WE REQUEST that EITHER

1.) Mr. Fletcher cease this harmful experiment with prior review of student journalism at ELHS and resume ELHS' long-standing and overwhelmingly successful practice of administrators not micromanaging student extracurriculars and allowing student journalists to write, grow, and learn from their mistakes without administrators having an undue role in the subjects of articles they choose to write and the words (within journalistic standards) that they choose to use. In addition, we believe that our advisor is fully capable of checking articles for factual accuracy, as our advisor has had a long and very successful stint as *Portrait* advisor.

OR

2.) Mr. Fletcher not take longer than 24 hours to review articles from the time they are emailed to him. We feel that since Mr. Fletcher specifically said he would only edit for factual accuracy and to ensure that students' writing quality is up to par, this is not an unreasonable request. We estimate that reviewing a 300-500 word article for factual accuracy and ensuring that the prose is up to par should not take longer than 10 minutes, so an 8-page issue (the longest we ever publish) usually containing about 12 articles should take 2 hours. If Mr. Fletcher feels he is too busy to make all his reviews within 24 hours of receiving the articles (which we understand), we suggest option 3, which is:

3.) Mr. Fletcher delegate his use of prior review to a staff member who is able to accommodate *Portrait*'s inherently busy schedule. While any faculty member with writing expertise should be sufficient, we suggest Mr. Akers. From a student perspective, he has always been willing and available to give feedback on students' writing, and has never been afraid to point out errors. Due to his track record of providing the kind of swift feedback that is necessary for *Portrait*, we suggest Mr. Akers as a compromise - allowing Mr. Fletcher to have a member of the English faculty review every article while ensuring that *Portrait*'s schedule is no longer adversely affected by prior review. However, we would like to restate our belief that any faculty member capable of providing swift feedback should be more than sufficient for Mr. Fletcher's stated intentions.

WE REQUEST that Mr. Fletcher stop censoring words such as "beer" and "sex" when the article is not encouraging or condoning illegal and/or underage activities. Stating the objective, quantitatively verifiable fact that part of the July 4th festivities for many Americans is consuming beer is NOT the same as encouraging or condoning alcohol use by students. Since we have enough integrity to not print vulgar or horribly inappropriate articles, we request that the administrators not be allowed to censor article ideas or content, especially when their censorship appears to be based on their personal biases.

WE REQUEST that Mr. Fletcher be willing to meet with students. We understand that Mr. Fletcher is extremely busy, and we understand that circumstances may arise where a scheduled meeting may have to be canceled. However, we consider his refusal to meet with the editors of *Portrait* due to the fact that he "had no desire or intention" of meeting them to be extremely disheartening. Having a busy schedule is very understandable, but

having no desire or intention to meet with students strikes us as counterproductive and highly unusual for a principal of ELHS.

WE REQUEST that Mr. Fletcher restore the editorial and publishing autonomy of Portrait. Not only has our system of writing, editing, and publishing the student newspaper been a positive and beneficial learning experience for our writers, but our system has produced (with occasional, expected, and understandable mishaps) quality journalism that enriches the student life at ELHS. Mr. Fletcher's micromanagement of this student extracurricular activity has negatively impacted this process, negatively impacted the morale and writing experience of our writers, has hindered our ability to enrich the student life of ELHS, and has disrupted and rendered vulnerable the system that has been successful for many years before Mr. Fletcher joined the district.

WE REQUEST that Mr. Fletcher respond to these requests by 12:00 p.m. on Thursday, May 21st. We do not believe that meeting these requests will place an undue burden on the ELHS administration; rather, we believe that meeting these requests will relieve current burdens on both the administration and on future generations of Portrait members.

WE EXPECT that there will be no retaliation or anger on Mr. Fletcher's part regarding this, because students have a right to contact their Superintendent and their Board of Education when attempts to work ongoing problems out with the principal have failed. We hope that he will understand our numerous frustrations and accommodate our requests.

CONCLUSION

Please respond to our requests by 12:00 p.m. on Thursday, May 21st. Do not mistake this as an act of aggression or hostility, because our goal as senior editors who will graduate in a few weeks is not to spend our last days at ELHS fighting against our administrators; rather, we want to ensure that we pass on to future Portrait writers a system that allows student journalists to have a good experience that enables them to explore and engage the student body in various issues that affect our community knowing that that they are writing for the *student newspaper*, not for an administrative bulletin.

We apologize for the length of this email, and we await your reply.

Yours truly,
Stefan Lindahl and Evan Hoopingarner
co-Editors-in-Chief, ELHS *Portrait*, 2014-2015