

About sixty years ago, the citizens of Des Moines, Iowa gathered to discuss the ongoing war in Vietnam. They decided to make known to the public their objections and opinions regarding the war. The plan was to wear black armbands to symbolize their support of a truce. However, when students showed up to school exercising their first amendment right to freedom of speech and expression, they were suspended indefinitely until they agreed to take off their armbands. These events were taken to the Supreme Court and are now known as the Tinker vs. Des Moines case.

In light of Tinker vs. Des Moines, the Supreme Court concluded that students *don't* shed their constitutional rights at the school gate. Still, the topic of students' rights at school has always been a controversial issue and is never completely agreed upon. Some believe this is because as the years progress, the ways in which students choose to express themselves differ. Now for example, instead of wearing an armband that symbolizes standing for peace, a student may make a post on social media or publish a video to a platform such as YouTube. But why is this shift relevant? Well, as of 2024, most high school students in the United States own a school-issued device. And while these devices *can* give more freedom to students, most school policies prohibit the use of social media or video sharing sites not only on school devices but during any time you are on a school campus. And if the way we express ourselves is through these sites, then aren't we being denied our right to free speech and expression?

Imagine you lived your whole life only having access to a couple of books and one day someone gives you a key to a big library full of books. Excited, you start imagining the amount of perspective you can gain by reading all these different books you now have access to. However, as you start reading the books in this library, you begin to notice a recurring theme. As you read more and more books you start to realize that all the books are written from the

perspective of a specific group of people with a certain set of beliefs. This is exactly what happens when school administrations provide students with devices but then restrict access to sources they don't agree with.

Furthermore, instead of completely blocking access to websites, schools must work to find a balance that enables students to learn freely while also enforcing rules that ensure the classroom remains a learning environment. Currently, many students are expressing concern about the restricted access to YouTube on school-issued devices. Their complaints are valid because while video sharing websites may become a distraction if used in a way that is inappropriate, many students view YouTube as a free way of learning new things or understanding concepts they need more help with. Restricting the use of social media sites also hinders our freedom of press. There is no denying the fact that social media platforms serve as watchdogs for the government and spread news from around the world. Not having access to social media keeps students in the dark about events happening around them.

While we must strive to make sure students are not denied their First Amendment rights, we must acknowledge the fact that not having sufficient rules can lead to many problems. Consider the Supreme Court cases of *Morse vs. Frederick* and *Bethel vs. Fraser*. In *Morse vs. Frederick*, a student held up a poster that encouraged illegal drug activity during a school event. Similarly, in *Bethel vs. Fraser*, a student used graphic sexual metaphors while giving a speech at a school ceremony. In both cases, the Supreme Court decided that the 1st Amendment does not prohibit schools from creating rules that protect against the inappropriate use of language and expression. Additionally, the internet allows for students to access things that may not be school or age appropriate, which is why schools must limit access to certain sites. Because students can be immature, devices with this kind of freedom can be dangerous.

To create harmony between students' 1st Amendment rights and the public-school environment, I think we need to observe patterns. Since some sites can be used in both an educational and recreational way, I don't think that any website that isn't specifically "school related" should be prohibited from school-issued devices. For example, Kindle Cloud Reader (a site where you can purchase or read eBooks) is a section of the Amazon website. By restricting Amazon, the Kindle Cloud Reader was also blocked. Many students, myself included, found this restriction unfair because the Kindle Cloud Reader was not in any way harmful or distracting; it could even be considered educational. That being said, other websites that can only be used in an inappropriate or distracting way should certainly be prohibited so as not to disrupt the school learning environment. In my opinion, the best way to maintain a healthy balance is to hire professionals to regularly observe patterns and collect data from the usage of student devices, restricting websites or sections of websites that can only be used in a harmful way, or unblocking sections of websites that can be used appropriately in a recreational/educational way. I also think there should be a way for students to reach out to these officials and request blocking or unblocking of websites. That way, students can voice their opinions while professionals evaluate the situation and come up with an appropriate solution.

Finally, we must understand that while the issue of student rights at school environments always has been and always will be a controversial subject that many will not agree on, it is important to evolve with the times and put a little more effort into creating harmony between the two. Balance is crucial when it comes to student rights at school, especially with technology. On an end note, recall the last time you read a political post on twitter, now known as X.

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This is an essay is an original writing by Valie Kamel.