

July 14, 2026

Brian Hill
Mesa County Valley School District 51
2115 Grand Avenue
Grand Junction, Colorado
81501

Sent via U.S. Mail and Electronic Mail (superintendent@d51schools.org)

Dear Superintendent Hill:

FIRE's Student Press Freedom Initiative¹ is concerned about reports that Grand Junction High School's former *Orange & Black* Newspaper adviser Steve Fox was removed because of the paper's coverage. We are also disappointed that the school failed to respond to our open records request. As you know, Colorado's New Voices law prohibits public schools from reassigning an adviser for acting to protect student expression,² and the Colorado Open Records Act requires that agencies answer requests within three working days.³ Accordingly, we echo student journalists' calls to reverse Fox's reassignment and ask that the school district fulfill our open records request pursuant to Colorado law.

I. Orange & Black Newspaper Adviser Steve Fox Was Reassigned Following Controversial Coverage.

On May 14, Fox met with GJHS principal Jory Sorensen and assistant principal Jared Burek.⁴ Fox, who had previously worked as a reporter for 15 years, had been the newspaper's adviser since 2021.⁵ During the meeting, Sorensen informed Fox that he was being reassigned to a new role and would no longer be the *Orange & Black's* adviser.⁶ During the meeting, Sorensen

¹ For more than 25 years, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) has defended freedom of expression and other individual rights on America's university campuses. FIRE's Student Press Freedom Initiative (SPFI) defends the rights of student journalists. You can learn more about our mission and activities at fire.org.

² C.R.S. § 22-1-120(9).

³ C.R.S. § 24-72-203(3)(b).

⁴ Recording of conversation between Steve Fox, adviser, Jory Sorensen, principal, and Jared Burek, assistant principal (May 14, 2026) (on file with author).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

referred to “complaints about the publication from a lot of stakeholders.”⁷ Sorensen raised concerns about recruiting and class size, and made vague assertions about students feeling unequal in the class, but did not expound on those concerns in a follow-up meeting or in writing.⁸ Following his reassignment for the 2026-27 school year, Fox will now teach English while continuing to serve as the yearbook adviser.⁹ A teacher with no known background in journalism or experience as a journalism adviser will take on the *Orange & Black* adviser position.¹⁰ Fox received neither a written reprimand nor a written notice of his reassignment.

Student leaders at the *Orange & Black* raised concerns that Sorensen and Burek were reassigning Fox in response to the newspaper’s content.¹¹ Specifically, students pointed to three controversial pieces of content published under Fox’s leadership that created tension between the publication and administration: an opinion piece on Gaza and Palestine, coverage of a lawsuit against the school, and a publication cover depicting a crowd of students at a football game in which a student’s shirt reading “I Hate Milfs” was visible.¹²

On June 22, FIRE submitted an open records request to learn more about Fox’s reassignment. After receiving no response, FIRE sent a follow-up email on June 30. As of the date of this letter, the school district has not responded to either request.

II. Colorado Law Prohibits Reassigning Student Media Advisers Based on Students’ Protected Expression.

Colorado’s student free expression law—commonly referred to as a New Voices law¹³—specifically safeguards public school employees facing retaliatory dismissal, suspension, discipline, transfer, and reassignment for protecting the expressive rights of students.¹⁴ Under Colorado’s New Voices law, student editors are responsible for the content of their publications, and advisers have the responsibility to encourage their free expression.¹⁵ In

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Marie Calkins, *Student press freedom under threat at GJHS*, GRAND JUNCTION SENTINEL (June 6, 2026), https://www.gjsentinel.com/opinion/columns/student-press-freedom-under-threat-at-gjhs/article_b68e8ba5-13ee-4dee-a7b5-9e9e9e9b76a8.html.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Mason Strippel, *Editorial: The reassignment of our adviser threatens student journalism*, ORANGE & BLACK (May 26, 2026), <https://oandbnews.com/7783/news/editorial-the-resignation-of-our-advisor-threatens-student-journalism/>; see also Letter from Megan Fromm and Mark Newton, former *Orange & Black* advisers, to Brian Hill, superintendent (June 4, 2026) (on file with author).

¹² Strippel, *supra* note 11; Calkins, *supra* note 9

¹³ See *New Voices in Colorado*, STUDENT PRESS LAW CTR., <https://splc.org/new-voices-in-colorado/>.

¹⁴ C.R.S. § 22-1-120(9).

¹⁵ C.R.S. § 22-1-120(5)(a). Colorado’s legislature enacted C.R.S. § 22-1-120 to provide student journalists and advisers stronger protections than those that would otherwise apply under the Supreme Court’s *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier* decision. 484 U.S. 260, 273 (1988). See CRS § 22-1-120(1), (2), (5)(a). State lawmakers adopted a framework that closely tracks the Supreme Court’s student speech framework set out in *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, which allows suppressing only that student

strengthening the rights of student journalists, the state legislature simultaneously ensured that school employees were protected from adverse professional consequences for refusing to override students' protected editorial decisions.¹⁶

Under Colorado's New Voices Act, Fox cannot lawfully be reassigned for refusing to censor students' protected expression.¹⁷ Yet administrators reassigned Fox, an experienced journalism adviser and former journalist, after tensions between administrators and the newsroom arose because of students' editorial decisions. GJHS did so without documentation or any written records to substantiate concerns that the publication's content would interfere with school operations. GJHS administrators' reassignment of Fox will "impact the editorial content of" the *Orange & Black* "in a way that [those administrators] could not accomplish directly," violating the students' rights under the New Voices law.¹⁸

The New Voices Act's statutory bar against retaliatory reassignment on the basis of protected expression is buttressed by the First Amendment, which prohibits terminating a publication's adviser for refusing to engage in censorship. In *Coppola v. Larson*, for example, a federal district court held that "[r]emoval of a student advisor to a school newspaper can indeed be a 'particularized, actual injury' to the Paper's student editors" for First Amendment purposes, and that removal based on the paper's content "would undoubtedly have an impermissibly chilling effect on [its] student editors and their willingness to produce articles critical of the [college] administration in the future."¹⁹ Like the student paper in *Coppola*, *Orange & Black* student journalists retain their First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and of the press²⁰—but those rights are at risk when their adviser is removed for retaliatory purposes. Accordingly, the school district must reverse Fox's reassignment.

speech which administrators show would "materially and substantially interfere with the requirements of appropriate discipline in the operation of schools." 393 U.S. 503, 506 (1969). See CRS § 22-1-120(3)(a)-(d).

¹⁶ C.R.S. § 22-1-120(5)(a). Only in limited circumstances may student journalists' work be prohibited: when the expression is obscene; defamatory; false as to any person who is not a public figure or involved in a matter of public concern; creates a clear and present danger of the commission of unlawful acts, the violation of lawful school regulations, or the material and substantial disruption of the orderly operation of the school; violates the right of others to privacy; or threatens violence to property or persons. C.R.S. § 22-1-120(3)(a)-(d).

¹⁷ C.R.S. § 22-1-120(9).

¹⁸ *Gustafson v. San Francisco Unified Sch. Dist.*, 2026 WL 228721 (Sup. Ct. Cal. Jan. 26, 2026) (ordering school district to reinstate ousted high school journalism adviser under California's student free expression law).

¹⁹ Civ. No. 06-2138, 2006 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 51205, at *25 (D.N.J. July 25, 2006); *accord Lane v. Simon*, No. 04-4079-JAR, 2005 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 11330, at *13 (D. Kan. June 2, 2005) (holding that "non-reappointment" of a student media adviser is "a particularized, actual injury to . . . editors of the paper"), *vac'd on other grounds*, 495 U.S. 1182 (10th Cir. 2007); see also *Perry v. Sindermann*, 408 U.S. 593, 598 (1972) ("[T]his Court has specifically held that the nonrenewal of a nontenured public school teacher's one-year contract may not be predicated on his exercise of First and Fourteenth Amendment rights We reaffirm those holdings here.") (internal citations omitted).

²⁰ C.R.S. § 22-1-120(1) (specifying public school students have the right to exercise freedom of speech and of the press). *Id.* § 22-1-120(5)(a) (vesting editorial authority in student editors).

III. The School District Must Abide by Its Obligations under Colorado's Open Records Act.

The school district has failed to respond to FIRE's original open records request or our follow-up email. Colorado's Open Records Act (CORA) provides that "[a]ll public records shall be open for inspection by any person at reasonable times."²¹ Under CORA, the law presumes a "reasonable time" to be three working days after the request, with extensions in extenuating circumstances not exceeding seven working days.²² Public records include "all writings made, maintained, or kept by" a public agency.²³ While public institutions are not required to make personnel files open for inspection,²⁴ public records not otherwise subject to an exception must be made available within a reasonable time as set out by CORA. Accordingly, CORA requires the school district to respond to FIRE's open records request and to make available for inspection the public records requested. Its failure to do so after two weeks violates the law.²⁵

All actions by the school district and its administrators must align with Colorado law and the First Amendment. FIRE asks that the district provide the records sought in our June 22, 2026 open records request, and we echo student journalists' calls for the reinstatement of former *Orange & Black* adviser Steve Fox.

We request a substantive response to this letter no later than July 28, 2026, confirming the district will adhere to its obligations to uphold student press freedoms and produce the records sought in accordance with Colorado law.

Sincerely,



Marie McMullan
Student Press Counsel, Campus Rights Advocacy

Cc: Jory Sorensen, Grand Junction High School Principal
Jared Burek, Grand Junction High School Assistant Principal

Encl.

²¹ C.R.S. § 24-72-203(1)(a).

²² *Id.* § 24-72-203(3)(b).

²³ *Id.* § 24-72-202(6)(a)(I).

²⁴ *Id.* § 24-72-204(2)(a)(II)(A).

²⁵ Improper denial of a public records request subjects the agency to liability for the requester's court costs and attorneys' fees. C.R.S. § 24-72-204(5)(b).



Marie McMullan <marie.mcmullan@fire.org>

Thanks for filling out this form: Colorado Open Records Act Request

2 messages

Forms Response Receipts <forms-receipts-noreply@google.com>
To: marie.mcmullan@fire.org

Mon, Jun 22, 2026 at 12:38 PM

Thanks for filling out this form: [Colorado Open Records Act Request](#)

You're receiving this email because you filled out the following form using your email address. **This form is owned by District 51 Google Apps.** Make sure you recognize and trust this form before copying or clicking on any links. If it looks suspicious, **report it**.

Here's what was received.

[View score](#)[Edit response](#)

Colorado Open Records Act Request

Please fill out the following form when submitting a CORA request.

Email *

marie.mcmullan@fire.org

Your Name

Marie McMullan

Your phone number *

215-717-3473 (ext. 334)

CORA requests are for existing records and documents. Which items are you requesting? *

1. Any communications (including emails, faxes, social media messages, text messages, letters, or other messages) sent by or to Principal Jory Sorensen which mention, relate, or pertain to Steve Fox, his classes, or responsibilities that include the following terms: "October 2024" AND ("publication cover" OR "front page" OR "frontpage"); "I Hate MILFS"; "Gaza"; "Israel"; "Palestine"; "Sydni Brandon"; "discrimination lawsuit" AND "story" OR "coverage." This request is limited to communications from April 1, 2026 until June 22, 2026.

2. Any communications (including emails, faxes, social media messages, text messages, letters, or other messages) sent by or to Assistant Principal Jared Burek which mention, relate, or pertain to Steve Fox, his classes, or responsibilities that include the following terms: "October 2024" AND ("publication cover" OR "front page" OR "frontpage"); "I Hate MILFS"; "Gaza"; "Israel"; "Palestine"; "Sydni Brandon"; "discrimination lawsuit" AND ("story" OR "coverage"). This request is limited to communications from April 1, 2026 until June 22, 2026.

3. Any communications (including emails, faxes, social media messages, text messages, letters, or other messages) sent by or to Assistant Principal Heather O'Brien which mention, relate, or pertain to Steve Fox, his classes, or responsibilities that include the following terms: "October 2024" AND ("publication cover" OR "front page" OR "frontpage"); "I Hate MILFS"; "Gaza"; "Israel"; "Palestine"; "Sydni Brandon"; "discrimination lawsuit" AND ("story" OR "coverage") This request is limited to communications from April 1, 2026 until June 22, 2026.

4. Any communications (including emails, faxes, social media messages, text messages, letters, or other messages) sent by or to Assistant Principal Josh Warinner which mention, relate, or pertain to Steve Fox, his classes, or responsibilities that include the following terms: "October 2024" AND ("publication cover" OR "front page" OR "frontpage"); "I Hate MILFS"; "Gaza"; "Israel"; "Palestine"; "Sydni Brandon"; "discrimination lawsuit" AND ("story" OR "coverage"). This request is limited to communications from April 1, 2026 until June 22, 2026.

Fee waiver request: This request is made on behalf of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Expression, a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization that works to preserve civil liberties. We request a waiver of any fees or costs associated with this request.

If you elect to charge a fee, please provide a cost estimate for each category of documents requested. Please also provide me with a W9 form.

If you elect to charge a fee, please provide an estimate for each category of documents requested. Please also provide me with a W9 form.

This request concerns a matter of public interest. The public has an interest in ensuring that a public high school is following its stated policies and state law when reassigning a newspaper adviser different responsibilities and that the school district is not engaging in unlawful retaliation based on students journalists' protected expression. The records are not sought for a commercial or personal interest, but rather for the purpose of providing the public with information concerning civil liberties in public schools.

Request for expedited processing: The records pertain to a matter of public importance and

current debate. Providing expedited production of the records will facilitate the public understanding of these matters before they are fully resolved. Any undue delay in production will undermine the purpose of the public records laws, which serve to allow public input and oversight of government affairs.

CORA requires the production of responsive records within a "reasonable time," which is presumed to be three working days in the absence of specific extenuating circumstances. (Colo. Rev. Stat. § 24-72-203(3)(b)). To the extent the above requests are divisible, we request that records be provided on a piecemeal or rolling basis.

Request for Privilege Log: If any otherwise responsive documents are withheld on the basis that they are privileged or fall within a statutory exemption, please provide a privilege log setting forth (1) the subject matter of the document; (2) the person(s) who sent and received the document; (3) the date the document was created or sent; and (4) the basis on which the document is withheld.

Please note that this request does not seek a search of student email accounts or records. These requests should in no way be construed to include a review or search of email accounts, websites, or other forms of data or document retention which are controlled by students or alumni. Any search should be limited to documents held by the administration and/or its staff members, including records created or maintained by persons acting in the capacity of administrators or staff members.

What is your timeline for your request (for example, a person requesting documents may ask for documents created between MM/DD/YYYY and MM/DD/YYYY)? *

04/01/2026 and 06/22/2026

Which people are involved in your request (for example, emails sent between Person X and Person Y and Person Z)? *

1. Principal Jory Sorensen and Steve Fox
2. Assistant Principal Jared Burek and Steve Fox
3. Assistant Principal Heather O'Brien and Steve Fox
4. Assistant Principal Josh Warinner and Steve Fox

By clicking below, I acknowledge that the district is not obligated by CORA to create a document that does not exist or provide documents that are not subject to release, such as personnel records or identifiable student information. I also acknowledge that any work that takes longer than an hour may come with a charge of \$30 per hour, and that printed copies will cost 25 cents per page. If work taking longer than an hour is anticipated, the Communications Department will alert you to