WALKING THE REGULATORY TIGHTROPE: BALANCING BULLIES’ FREE SPEECH RIGHTS AGAINST THE RIGHTS OF VICTIMS TO BE LET ALONE WHEN REGULATING OFF CAMPUS K-12 STUDENT CYBER-SPEECH

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by

Lisa Smith-Butler¹

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Introduction

Jared and Delilah, two high school students at James Island County High, dated for months, claiming each other as “soul mates.” A new student, Perry, then arrived at school, and Delilah broke up with Jared to pursue a relationship with Perry. After the breakup, Jared hated Delilah and thought the worst of her. While working from home on his laptop, Jared posted comments to his Facebook page, stating that Delilah was a lying, cheating, whore who was HIV positive. Other derogatory comments followed. Classmates shared Jared’s post. Many of the school’s students and some of the school’s personnel read the comments while at home. A national news reporter, related to one the school’s teachers, saw the post, picked up the story and began publishing a series of articles on teen cyber-bullying. The school was in an uproar. Students sided with either Jared or Delilah. No one stayed neutral. Delilah and her parents went to school to complain to the principal. They alleged that Jared’s behavior constituted harassment of Delilah because of her sex. Delilah and her parents insisted that the school punish Jared.

While the above is a hypothetical, it is a scenario that schools and school administrations are facing across the country. This is speech that takes place off campus and after school hours;
yet, it impacts the school. Can the principal address the issue and punish Jared for this speech? Should the principal tell Delilah and her parents that their options are limited to suing Jared for libel? Can the school lose its funding from the Department of Education for failing to enforce anti-harassment policies? Is there liability to which the school will be subjected at the state level for failing to adequately address cyber-bullying? These are conflicts that American school personnel now face on a frequent basis. How do school officials handle and resolve the conflicting rights of students, their parents, and teachers regarding free speech with the right to be let alone and be free from bullying and cyber-bullying?

This article will examine whether public school officials can regulate and punish off campus student cyber-speech when this speech makes its way onto the school’s campus. It will review recent federal circuit and district court decisions from the past decade that interpret and apply the United States Supreme Court’s student speech analysis.2 It will examine the interaction of this analysis with the First Amendment,3 the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights’ laws, the Department’s interpretation of these laws on harassment that apply to schools,4 and state legislatures’ attempts to limit and cope with cyber-bullying in the public school setting.5

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3 U.S. CONST. amend. I.
While bullying has been an issue with which schools and students have coped for decades, if not centuries, cyber-bullying is a recent phenomena. How is cyber-bullying defined, and how does it differ from bullying?

Several decisions from lower courts provide examples that demonstrate courts’ definitions of cyber-bullying. In the last two years, the United States Courts of Appeals for the Second, Third, Fourth, and Eighth Circuits heard arguments and then published decisions, involving off campus student cyber-speech. A review of each decision provides examples of what the courts and legislatures consider to constitute cyber-bullying or threats. While the United States Court of Appeals for the Second and Third Circuits have handed down two
decisions each on the topic, the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth and Eighth Circuits each issued only one opinion.\(^8\)

The United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit considered two cases, involving off campus student cyber-speech. Both decisions involved speech that was critical of school officials.\(^9\) In one case\(^10\), a middle school student created an Instant Message (IM) icon on his home computer that showed a “pistol firing a bullet at a person’s head, above which were dots representing spattered blood. Beneath the drawing appeared the words ‘Kill Mr. VanderMolen.’”\(^11\) Four years later, the court confronted a similar case in which a student disagreed with a school’s decision to refuse to allow students to use a certain facility on a particular date for JamFest.\(^12\) Despite student complaints, the school refused to re-schedule.\(^13\) Students objected.\(^14\) One student, Avery Doninger, created a blog at home on her parents’ computer, urging students, their parents and concerned citizens to call the “douchebags” at the school office to complain.\(^15\) In both of these decisions, the school’s punishment of the students’ speech was allowed to stand.\(^16\)

The United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit also dealt with cases that involved the use of the Internet to criticize school officials. The court confronted two cases in its 2009 term. One case arose from the Eastern District of Pennsylvania\(^17\) while the other case

\(^9\) Wisniewski v. Bd. of Educ. of Westport Cent. Sch. Dist., 494 F.3d 34, 36 (2d Cir. 2007).
\(^10\) Id.
\(^12\) Id.
\(^13\) Id.
\(^14\) Id.
\(^15\) Id. at 344.
\(^16\) Wisniewski, 494 F.3d at 40. Doninger, 642 F.3d at 358.
\(^17\) Snyder v. Blue Mountain Sch. Dist., 593 F.3d 286, 291 (3d Cir. 2010), vacated.
came out of the Western District of Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{18} Both cases involved similar facts; yet two different panels appeared to reach opposite results.\textsuperscript{19} In one case, a high school senior created a parody profile of his high school principal while at home on his MySpace account, referring to the principal as a “big steroid freak,” “big whore,” and “big fag” along with other “big” insults.\textsuperscript{20} He then shared the profile parody with other friends from school.\textsuperscript{21} While the court was sympathetic to the principal’s distress, it concluded that the school’s punishment had violated the student’s free speech rights.\textsuperscript{22} On the same day, a different panel of the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit also handed down a decision, arising from the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, involving another high school parody of a school principal.\textsuperscript{23} In this particular case, a student created an online profile of her high school principal, describing his interests as “detention, being a tight ass, riding the train, spending time with my child (who looks like a gorilla), baseball, my golden pen, fucking in my office, hitting on students and their parents.”\textsuperscript{24} This decision upheld the school’s punishment of the student.\textsuperscript{25}

While both the United States Courts of Appeals for the Second and Third Circuits heard cases involving student criticism of school officials, the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit heard and published an opinion in a case involving student on student Internet speech.\textsuperscript{26} The decision arose in West Virginia and involved a female student who created a web

\textsuperscript{18} Layshock v. Hermitage Sch. Dist., 593 F. 3d 249 (3d Cir. 2010), \textit{vacated}.
\textsuperscript{19} See Easton, \textit{infra} note 182.
\textsuperscript{20} Layshock, 593 F.3d at 252-253.
\textsuperscript{21} Id. at 253.
\textsuperscript{22} Id. at 264-265.
\textsuperscript{23} See Snyder, 593 F.3d at 291.
\textsuperscript{24} Id.
\textsuperscript{25} Id. at 307-308.
page that was allegedly about another classmate.\(^{27}\) The website labeled the female student a “whore” and stated that “Shay has herpes.”\(^{28}\) The student, Kara Kowalski, was suspended and then sued, alleging a violation of her free speech.\(^{29}\) The court concluded that the school did not violate her free speech rights when it punished her.\(^{30}\)

Lastly the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit reviewed, de novo, a decision for summary judgment from the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri in \textit{D.J.M. v. Hannibal Public Sch. Dist.}\(^{31}\) \textit{D.J.M.} differs from the \textit{Wisniewski, Doninger, Layshock, Snyder} and \textit{Kowalski} decisions because it involved threats against other students, made by D.J.M. to another classmate, via his home computer.\(^ {32}\) A concerned classmate shared the threatening emails, which included threats to get a gun and shoot other students, with the principal who then contacted the police.\(^ {33}\) After D.J.M. was released from juvenile detention, he was suspended for ten days by the school; shortly thereafter, he was suspended for the remainder of the semester.\(^ {34}\) D.J.M. and his parents then sued the school, arguing that his First Amendment speech rights had been violated as he contended that his threats did not constitute “true threats.”\(^ {35}\) The court upheld\(^ {36}\) the United States District Court for the Eastern District Court of Missouri’s grant of summary judgment in favor of the Hannibal School District.\(^ {37}\)

\(^ {27}\) \textit{Id.} at 567.
\(^ {28}\) \textit{Id.} at 568.
\(^ {29}\) \textit{Id.} at 570-572.
\(^ {30}\) \textit{Id.} at 577.
\(^ {31}\) \textit{D.J.M.}, 647 F.3d at 754.
\(^ {32}\) \textit{Id.}
\(^ {33}\) \textit{Id.}
\(^ {34}\) \textit{Id.}
\(^ {35}\) \textit{Id.} at 760.
\(^ {36}\) \textit{Id.} at 767.
\(^ {37}\) \textit{See Mardis v. Hannibal Public Sch. Dist}, 784 F. Supp.2d 1114 (E.D.MO 2010.)
All of the above describe factual backgrounds from circuit court decisions that involved off campus student cyber-speech which ultimately found its way on campus.\textsuperscript{38} Students used their home computers, working on their own time rather than school time, to create web pages that were aimed at officials or classmates to protest or complain about school related personnel, classmates or events.\textsuperscript{39} Although these web pages were created off campus without school equipment, the schools punished, typically either with suspension or expulsion, the speech and the student.\textsuperscript{40} These punishments were then appealed by students, arguing such school conduct violated their First Amendment rights.\textsuperscript{41}

This type of speech has existed for years in school settings.\textsuperscript{42} Principals disciplined.\textsuperscript{43} Students grumbled.\textsuperscript{44} Students insulted each other.\textsuperscript{45} Because the speech was not easily or readily publicized, it went unnoticed and was ignored.\textsuperscript{46} The Internet, or cyber-space, changed this.\textsuperscript{47} Principals and school personnel were mocked and insulted online.\textsuperscript{48} Student rivalries and bullying moved off the playground and online.\textsuperscript{49} What once took weeks, months and

\textsuperscript{38}See McCarthy, infra note 302, at 4-11.
\textsuperscript{39}Id.
\textsuperscript{40}Id.
\textsuperscript{41}U.S. CONST. amend. I.
\textsuperscript{42}R. Chase Ramey, STUDENT FIRST AMENDMENT SPEECH AND EXPRESSION RIGHTS: ARMBANDS TO BONG HITS, 139 (ed. Melvin I. Urfosky, 2011).
\textsuperscript{43}Id. at 2.
\textsuperscript{44}Id.
\textsuperscript{45}Id. at 158-159.
\textsuperscript{46}Id. at 139.
\textsuperscript{47}Id.
\textsuperscript{48}Id.
\textsuperscript{49}Id. at 141-142.
\textsuperscript{50}Daniel J. Solove, THE FUTURE OF REPUTATION: GOSSIP, RUMOR, AND PRIVACY ON THE INTERNET 11 (2007.)
\textsuperscript{51}As an example of local news rapidly becoming national news, consider the story of Karen Klein. In June of 2012, Karen Klein, a bus monitor employed by the public school system in Greece, New York, was recorded being bullied by students on the bus. The video was posted on YouTube and “show(ed) Klein enduring profanity, insults and threats from middle school students on a school bus.” See Online Campaign Winds Down for Bullied NY Bus Monitor Karen Klein as Fund Total Tops $683,000, WASHINGTON POST, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/online-campaign-winds-down-for-bullied-ny-bus-monitor-karen-klein0as-fund-total-tops-683000/2012/07/20/gIOAvAJ3xW story.html (last visited July 7, 2012).
sometimes years to travel through a community now buzzed through it in hours if not minutes.\textsuperscript{50}

What was once only local news, now often goes viral, becoming national news in just hours.\textsuperscript{51}

If such behavior was ignored in the past, why are school authorities now eager to regulate this type of student speech? Are schools seeking to expand their authority and power over students? Or are schools trying to reign in students and sort out threats, cope with the effects of student on student cyber-bullying, and teach students civil discourse in addition to teaching the standard curriculum while also coping with the impact of No Child Left Behind?\textsuperscript{52} What happened?

April 20, 1999\textsuperscript{53} altered the public school landscape as thoroughly as September 11, 2001\textsuperscript{54} changed air travel. On April 20\textsuperscript{th}, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold opened fire at 11:19 a.m. at Columbine High School in Columbine, Colorado.\textsuperscript{55} Their massacre lasted forty-nine minutes.\textsuperscript{56} They killed thirteen people and wounded twenty-three.\textsuperscript{57} Their rampage ended at 12:08 p.m. when they committed suicide, bringing the total number killed in the Columbine

\textsuperscript{52} 20 U.S.C. §6301 (2006 & Supp.).
\textsuperscript{53} Dave Cullen, COLUMBINE 372 (2009).
\textsuperscript{55} Cullen, supra note 53, at 45.
\textsuperscript{56} Id. at 349-353.
\textsuperscript{57} Id. at 83-98.
\textsuperscript{58} Id. at 83-84.
\textsuperscript{59} Id. at 376-380.
\textsuperscript{60} Id. at 32-98.
Massacre to fifteen. An investigation revealed hate filled web sites created by the student killers, journal entries containing threats and plans, and other bizarre behaviors. While some of these items came to the attention of law enforcement before the massacre, none of it was taken seriously until after the massacre. Recrimination, blame, lawsuits, new school policies, and zero tolerance resulted. When asked for an explanation for Harris’ and Klebold’s behavior, some said they had been bullied.

Besides school violence and school shootings, cyber-bullying and cyber-harassment have become well publicized problems that public schools are encountering. In Massachusetts in January of 2010, high school freshman, Phoebe Prince, committed suicide after enduring on campus bullying and cyber-bullying that her parents allege the school’s administration knew about but did nothing to stop. What cyber-bullying was used? Besides in school taunts and insults, students also posted on Prince’s Facebook page, calling her a “slut” and “whore.” Three of the six students, charged with the criminal harassment, i.e. bullying, of Prince, were placed on probation in May of 2011 while South Hadley High School settled its suit by

61 Id. at 349-408. See also David L. Hudson, Jr., Censorship of Student Internet Speech: The Effect of Diminishing Student Rights, Fear of the Internet and Columbine, 2000 L. REV. MICH. ST. U. DET. CL. 199, 207-211 (2000).
62 Cullen, supra note 53, at 157-159 and 339-341.
65 Kevin Cullen, A Mother’s Farewell, Forbidding Vengeance; Phoebe Prince, Her Daughter, Lost, She Shares a Shattered Heart, BOSTON GLOBE, May 15, 2011, at B1.
66 Id.
67 Erik Eckholm, 3 Ex-Students Get Probation in Bullying Linked to a Suicide, BOSTON GLOBE, May 6, 2011, at A19.
Prince’s parents for $225,000.00.\textsuperscript{68} Since Prince, there have been several high profile cyber-bullying cases involving student suicides.\textsuperscript{69}

With school violence and cyber-bullying increasing, schools, school boards, state legislatures and the Department of Education are attempting to create solutions to deal with the rise of bullying, cyber-bullying and cyber-harassment. According to the National School Boards Association,\textsuperscript{70} forty-six states, as of April 2012,\textsuperscript{71} have enacted some form of legislation\textsuperscript{72} that concerns bullying, cyber-bullying, or harassment by students in the public school setting. The Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights drafted and published a Dear Colleague Letter on October 26, 2010, concerning the same issue.\textsuperscript{73} The problem has become so pervasive and persistent that the American Jewish Committee and the Religious Freedom Education

\textsuperscript{68} O’Ryan Johnson, \textit{Town Paid $225G to Avoid Prince Suit; ACLU Forces South Hadley to Disclose Sum}, \textit{Boston Herald}, Dec. 28, 2011, at B15.
\textsuperscript{69} Jocelyn Ho, Comment, \textit{Bullied to Death: Cyberbullying and Student Online Speech Rights}, 2012 Fl. L. Rev. 789, 790 (2012). For further commentary as well as discussion of specific cases of bullycide, see Ari Ezra Waldman, \textit{Tormented: AntiGay Bullying in Schools}, 84 Temple L. Rev. 385, 392-395 (2012).
\textsuperscript{71} Id. at \http{http://www.nsba.org/}{http://www.nsba.org/SchoolLaw/Issues/Safety/Table.pdf} (last visited July 11, 2012).
\textsuperscript{73} Letter from Russlyn Ali, Assistant Secretary for Office of Civil Rights, Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, to Public (October 26, 2010) available at \http{http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.htm}{http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.htm}. This letter is known as the Department’s Dear Colleague Letter (DCL) on bullying.
Students, disciplined under these school policies, are suing, arguing that their schools have violated their First Amendment rights by imposing discipline for what amounts to off-campus cyber-speech which is protected by the First Amendment. Constitutional law scholar and dean, Erwin Chemerinsky, argues in an essay that this is all part of the “deconstitutionalization of education” by the United States Supreme Court. Chemerinsky concludes that the “…Supreme Court’s overall approach has been to withdraw the courts from involvement in American schools.” He examines the Court’s decisions in the areas of desegregation, school funding, and freedom of speech. Chemerinsky argues that “[u]nder current First Amendment law, the most basic principle is that the government generally cannot restrict speech based on content unless strict scrutiny is met.” Applying these principles to speech in the public university setting, Chemerinsky says “[a] public university simply cannot prohibit the expression of hate, including anti-Semitism, without running afoul of this principle. Punishing speech because of its hateful message is inherently a content-based restriction on speech and would violate the First Amendment.”

77 Id. at 112.
78 Id. at 113-127.
80 Id.
How are public schools handling student cyber-speech that can also be categorized as cyber-bullying or cyber-harassment? Courts are relying on the United States Supreme Court 1969 decision in *Tinker* to regulate student cyber-speech in the public school setting. Despite utilizing the *Tinker* test, both federal district and circuit courts have reached a variety of different conclusions. Are the courts misapplying or misunderstanding *Tinker*? Are the facts of each case determinative of the outcome? Are these decisions reconcilable, or is there a circuit split?

This article examines the existing speech cases from federal circuit and district courts in light of the *Morse* Quartet, a series of United States Supreme Court decisions on student speech rights. Part II reviews the holdings of these decisions and explores their interaction with the First Amendment. Part III reviews the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights definition of harassment while Part IV examines state cyber-bullying legislation. Part V analyzes and reviews the interplay of the Constitution, the United States Supreme Court decisions, state legislation, the Department of Education’s laws and interpretations, and school policies with these cases, attempting to ascertain the appropriate analysis for student cyber-speech cases. Part VI concludes that there is a circuit split that requires the intervention of the United States Supreme Court to resolve.

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84 See Dickler, supra note 2, at 355.
First Amendment: Cyber-Speech

A. First Amendment: What Does It Mean?

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; or
the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a
redress of grievances.  

Protecting speech was so important that it was enshrined in the First Amendment of the
Bill of Rights. The United States Supreme Court has issued numerous opinions, discussing
this amendment. As the Court recently stated in Snyder v. Phelps, “the First Amendment reflects
‘a profound national commitment to the principle that debate on public issues should be
uninhibited, robust, and wide-open.’” Why? Quoting Garrison, the Court noted that free
speech was “…more than self-expression; it is the essence of self-government” while
acknowledging that “speech on public issues occupies the highest rung of the hierarchy of First
Amendment values, and is entitled to special protection.”

How is Snyder applicable to the student cyber-speech cases? Besides providing the most
recent United States Supreme Court First Amendment analysis, Snyder, like the school cyber-
speech decisions, deals with speech that can be described as unkind or cruel. The Snyder Court
upheld Westboro Baptist’s right to picket outside an area near veterans’ funerals with signs that

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85 U.S. CONST., amend. 1.
86 Michael Kent Curtis, Historical Linguistics, Inkblots and Life After Death: The Privileges or Immunities of
87 According to Shepard’s Citations, there are 102,477 total citations to the First Amendment. See LEXIS-NEXIS,
(1964)).
90 Snyder, 131 S.Ct. at 1215 (citing Garrison v. Louisiana, 379 U.S. 64, 74-75 (1964.))
91 Id. at 1215(citing Connick v. Myers 461 U.S. 138, 145 (1983)).
read “God Hates the USA/Thank God for 9/11” “Fag Troops” “Thank God for Dead Soldiers,” and “God Hates You.” The Court’s majority opinion concluded:

Speech is powerful. It can stir people to action, move them to tears of both joy and sorrow, and—as it did here—infect great pain. On the facts before us, we cannot react to that pain by punishing the speaker. As a Nation we have chosen a different course—to protect even hurtful speech on public issues to ensure that we do not stifle public debate. That choice requires that we shield Westboro….

How do we apply these principles in the public school setting? Do students and teachers have free speech? What happens in public schools, grades K-12, when teachers or principals punish students for speech made or directed at personnel or the students of the school? Is this speech protected? Can schools punish these student speakers even if the speakers “infect great pain?”

B. Morse Quartet

The Supreme Court answered the question about students’ speech rights in the public school setting in their 1969 decision in Tinker v. Des Moines. The Court further delineated its student speech analysis with three later opinions. Grouped together, these four opinions are sometimes referred to as the Morse Quartet.

Tinker was the first decision of the quartet. It involved the now infamous, non-disruptive, black armband worn by Mary Beth Tinker to her school to protest the Vietnam War. Tinker was suspended from school until she agreed to no longer wear the armband to school.

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92 Id. at 1216-1217.
93 Id.
94 Id.
95 Tinker, 393 U.S. at 503.
96 Dickler, supra note 2, at 355.
97 Id. at 362-364.
98 Tinker, 393 U.S. at 504.
99 Id.
Her parents sued on her behalf, arguing the school’s actions violated Mary Beth’s First Amendment free speech rights. The Tinker Court agreed with Mary Beth, stating “…it can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.” Tinker established the analysis for the punishment of student speech as follows:

A student’s rights, therefore do not embrace merely the classroom hours. When he is in the cafeteria, or on the playing field, or on the campus during authorized hours, he may express his opinions, even on controversial subjects like the conflict in Vietnam, if he does so without materially and substantially interfere(ing) with the requirements of appropriate discipline in the operation of the school and without colliding with the rights of others….But conduct by the student, in class or out of it, which for any reason, whether it stems from time, place or type of behavior—materially disrupts classwork or involves substantial disorder or invasion of the rights of others is, of course, not immunized by the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech.

Between 1986 and 2007, the Court decided three more student speech cases which limited the holding of Tinker. Frasier allowed schools to punish lewd and offensive speech given at a high school assembly to a captive audience while Hazelwood permitted schools to exercise editorial control, for pedagogical purposes, over speech which carried the imprimatur of the school. Morse allowed the punishment of student speech, occurring at a school sanctioned off campus event that appeared to advocate the use of illegal drugs.

In 1986, Matthew Fraser was suspended for three days and had his name removed from the list of potential graduation speakers because of a candidate speech he delivered to a high
school assembly. In the speech, Fraser used sexual innuendo to praise one of the candidates running for school office. The District Court and the Circuit Court of Appeals, both applying Tinker, held that the school violated Fraser’s First Amendment rights. The United States Supreme Court, in a majority opinion authored by then Chief Justice Burger, reversed, framing the issue as “…whether the First Amendment prevents a school district from disciplining a high school student for giving a lewd speech at a school assembly.” Concluding such discipline was allowed, the Court stated:

The First Amendment guarantees wide freedom in matters of adult public discourse….It does not follow, however, that simply because the use of an offensive form of expression may not be prohibited to adults making what the speaker considers a political point, the same latitude must be permitted to children in a public school…. [T]he constitutional rights of students in public school are not automatically coextensive with the rights of adults in other settings. As cogently expressed by Judge Newman, “the First Amendment gives a high school student the classroom right to wear Tinker’s armband, but not Cohen’s jacket.”

Frasier was followed two years later by Hazelwood School Dist. v. Kuhlmeier which involved school censorship of a student edited school newspaper. The Court framed the issue as “…the extent to which educators may exercise editorial control over the contents of a high school newspaper produced as part of the school’s journalism curriculum.” The high school principal deleted two articles from the newspaper before it went to print. The paper’s student

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109 Fraser, 478 U.S. at 677-679.
110 Id. at 677-678.
111 Id. at 679-680.
112 Id. at 677.
113 Id. at 682.
115 Id. at 262.
116 Id.
117 Id.
editors sued, alleging this censorship violated their First Amendment rights.\textsuperscript{118} Again, the Court further eroded the holding in \textit{Tinker}. Writing for the majority, Justice White stated:

\ldots we hold that educators do not offend the First Amendment by exercising editorial control over the style and content of student speech in school sponsored expressive activities so long as their actions are reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns\ldots . This standard is consistent with our oft-expressed view that the education of the Nation’s youth is primarily the responsibility of parents, teachers, and state and local school officials, and not of federal judges\ldots .\textsuperscript{119}

The Court last addressed student speech in 2007 with its decision in \textit{Morse v. Frederick},\textsuperscript{120} completing the series of cases that are sometimes referred to as the \textit{Morse Quartet}.\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Morse} involved off campus speech at a school sponsored activity.\textsuperscript{122} The Olympic Torch Relay was scheduled to pass through Juneau, Alaska on its way to the winter games in Salt Lake City, Utah.\textsuperscript{123} During the procession, the relay was scheduled to pass by Frederick’s high school.\textsuperscript{124} To celebrate and participate, Deborah Morse, school principal, allowed teachers and students to leave the school building and attend the relay on the city streets as a school sponsored activity.\textsuperscript{125} As the television cameras rolled by, Joseph Frederick, a student, unfurled a fourteen foot banner that proclaimed: “BONG HiTS 4 JESUS.”\textsuperscript{126} Believing the banner to be advocating the use of an illegal drug, marijuana, Morse demanded that Frederick lower the banner.\textsuperscript{127} He refused so she confiscated the banner and then suspended him for ten days.\textsuperscript{128} Frederick sued, alleging Morse’s behavior violated his First Amendment rights.\textsuperscript{129} He argued his banner was not

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[118] Id. at 264-265.
\item[119] Id. at 273.
\item[120] Morse, 551 U.S. at 393.
\item[121] Dickler, supra note 2, at 355.
\item[122] Morse, 551 U.S. at 396.
\item[123] Id. at 397.
\item[124] Id.
\item[125] Id.
\item[126] Id.
\item[127] Id. at 398.
\item[128] Id. at 398-399.
\item[129] Id. at 398-400.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
promoting illegal drug use but rather was simply nonsense, designed to catch the television cameras’ attention.\textsuperscript{130} The Court framed the issue as “…whether a principal may, consistent with the First Amendment, restrict student speech at a school event, when that speech is reasonably viewed as promoting illegal drug use. We hold that she may.”\textsuperscript{131} The Court then further explained its analysis and holding in \textit{Fraser}, saying:

\text{\ldots}[I]t is enough to distill from \textit{Fraser} two basic principles. First, \textit{Fraser’s} holding demonstrates that “the constitutional rights of students in public school are not automatically coextensive with the rights of adults in other settings….Had \textit{Fraser} delivered the same speech in a public forum outside the school context, it would have been protected….In school, however, \textit{Fraser’s} First Amendment rights were circumscribed “in light of the special characteristics of the school environment….” Second, \textit{Fraser} established that the mode of analysis set forth in \textit{Tinker} is not absolute. Whatever approach \textit{Fraser} employed, it certainly did not conduct the “substantial disruption” analysis proscribed by \textit{Tinker}. …The case (\textit{Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier}) is nevertheless instructive because it confirms both principles cited above. \textit{Kuhlmeier} acknowledged that schools may regulate some speech “even though government could not censor similar speech outside the school….” And, like \textit{Fraser}, it confirms that the rule of \textit{Tinker} is not the only basis for restricting student speech.\textsuperscript{132}

None of the above decisions deals with off campus student cyber-speech; yet, these are the decisions that lower federal courts, both district and circuit, are relying upon to analyze whether school officials can punish off campus student cyber-speech. As the discussion below indicates, lower courts are applying the \textit{Morse} Quartet analysis with varying results.

\textbf{C. Circuit Courts: Split or Reconcilable?}

Between 2007 and 2011, the United States Courts of Appeals for the Second, Third, Fourth, and Eighth Circuits published opinions that dealt with off campus student cyber-
speech. The court upheld the school’s punishment of the student speech in both cases. Meanwhile the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit published two decisions, issued by two different panels, on February 4, 2010, that appeared to reach different results with seemingly similar facts. A decision from the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania which punished a student for an Internet profile parody of her high school principal was upheld. A decision from the United States District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania agreed with a student that his First Amendment rights were violated when he was punished for creating a profile parody of his principal on My Space. Because this appeared to many observers to reflect a split within the Third Circuit, the court re-heard both cases again while sitting en banc. Ultimately, the students prevailed in both cases with the court holding that school officials had violated their First Amendment rights. The United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit heard a case that involved the school’s punishment of a student for offensive cyber-speech made against another student. The court upheld the school’s punishment of the student. The United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit upheld the decision of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri D.J.M., agreeing with the court that D.J.M.’s emails,

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133 See Doninger, 642 F.3d at 344; Wisniewski, 494 F.3d at 34; Layshock, 650 F.3d at 205; Snyder, 650 F.3d at 915; Kowalski, 652 F.3d at 565, and D.J.M., 647 F.3d at 754. Other circuit courts have yet to address the explicit issue of off campus regulation of student cyber-speech.

134 Doninger, 642 F.3d at 344-349; Wisniewski, 494 F.3d at 36-37.

135 Doninger, 642 F.3d at 357-358; Wisniewski, 494 F.3d at 39.

136 See Easton, infra note 182, at 18.

137 Id.

138 Snyder, 593 F.3d at 307-308.

139 Layshock, 593 F.3d at 264-265.

140 See Snyder, 650 F.3d at 915. See also Layshock, 650 F.3d at 205.

141 See Snyder, 650 F.3d at 932-933. See also Layshock, 650 F.3d at 219.

142 Kowalski, 652 F.3d at 565.

143 Id. at 576-577.
threatening to “get a gun” and shoot classmates did constitute “true threats” that were not protected by the First Amendment.  

Because similar fact patterns appeared to be involved in the above cases with differing results reached, Doninger, Snyder and Kowalski were appealed to the United States Supreme Court, arguing that a circuit split existed.  

Despite the differing results, the Court denied certiorari for all three petitions, leaving the decisions to stand.  

Is there a circuit split or can these cases be reconciled? This section will examine and review the decisions.

The decisions from the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit will be reviewed first. This court has decided two cases, Wisniewski v. Bd. of Ed. of the Weedsport Central Sch. Dist. and Doninger v. Niehoff on the subject. In both decisions, the court upheld the school’s right to punish students for off campus student cyber-speech that was ultimately aimed at school officials.

In Wisniewski, a middle school student, Aaron Wisniewski, was suspended from school because of an Instant Message (IM) he sent classmates from his parents’ home computer. The message included an IM icon with “a small drawing of a pistol firing a bullet at a person’s head, above which were dots representing spattered blood….Beneath the drawing appeared the words ‘Kill Mr. VanderMolen.’ Philip VanderMolen was Aaron’s English teacher at the time.”

While Aaron did not send the IM icon or message to any school officials, he shared it with some

144 D.J.M., 647 F.3d at 767.
145 See infra, note 303.
146 See infra, note 303.
147 494 F.3d 34 (2d Circ. 2007.)
148 527 F.3d 41 (2d Circ. 2008), cert. denied, 132 S.Ct. 499 (2011.)
149 Doninger, 642 F.3d at 357-358; Wisniewski, 494 F.3d at 39.
150 Wisniewski, 494 F.3d, at 35-36.
151 Id. at 36.
of his classmates.\textsuperscript{152} One of the classmates eventually shared the icon and message with Mr. VanderMolen who was reportedly distressed.\textsuperscript{153} VanderMolen then shared it with school authorities.\textsuperscript{154} The school shared it with the local Superintendent’s office who in turn shared it with the local police department.\textsuperscript{155} When confronted, Aaron admitted he had created the IM and icon but insisted he intended it only as a joke.\textsuperscript{156} Once the severity of the issue was pointed out to him, Aaron expressed regret.\textsuperscript{157} Mr. VanderMolen asked to stop teaching Aaron, and this was allowed.\textsuperscript{158}

In the meantime, the police department investigated and questioned Aaron.\textsuperscript{159} He was referred to a psychologist for testing.\textsuperscript{160} Based on the testing and evaluation, the psychologist concluded the icon was intended as a joke, that Aaron had no violent intent and posed no actual threat.\textsuperscript{161} The police investigation was concluded with no arrest being made, but there was a hearing before the school superintendent.\textsuperscript{162} At the hearing, the superintendent found that “…(s)ubstantial and competent evidence exists that Aaron engaged in the act of sending a threatening message to his buddies, the subject of which was a teacher. He admitted it….I conclude Aaron did commit the act of threatening a teacher…creating an environment
threatening the health, safety and welfare of others...”163 Aaron was suspended for a semester.164

Aaron sued, arguing his icon was protected speech under the First Amendment.165 The court upheld the school’s punishment of Aaron, concluding that the fact that his conduct occurred off campus did not “necessarily insulate him from school discipline.”166 Instead the court applied Tinker’s “reasonably foreseeable risk” test to the facts and concluded that it was foreseeable that school authorities would learn of Aaron’s pistol icon.167 It was then foreseeable that the threatening icon would “materially and substantially” disrupt the school’s work.168

A year later, the Second Circuit heard arguments in Doninger v. Niehoff169 which also involved student speech. In Doninger, Avery Doninger was involved in a dispute with school officials about the scheduling and location of a “battle of the bands” known as JamFest.170 Because of vacation and personnel issues, Doninger and the Student Council were advised that JamFest would either have to be re-scheduled for another date or re-located to another facility if the Council was determined to adhere to the named date.171 After learning of this, the Student Council met in the computer lab and accessed a parent’s email account.172 From this email account, the students sent out a mass email to students, teachers, and parents, advising them to contact Paula Schwartz, the district superintendent, to see JamFest was held as scheduled in the

163 Id. at 36-37.
164 Id. at 37.
165 Id.
166 Id. at 38.
167 Id. at 38-39.
168 Id.
170 Id. at 339.
171 Id.
172 Id.
new auditorium. Unhappy with this information, Avery Doninger then posted an entry on her blog from her home that said:

jamfest is cancelled due to douchebags in central office. here is an email that we sent to a ton of people and asked them to forward to everyone in their address book to help get support for jamfest. Basically, because we sent it out, Paula Schwartz is getting a TON of phone calls and emails and such. we have so much support and we really appreciate it. however, she got pissed off and decided to just cancel the whole thing altogether….

Because of the vulgar language of the blog and the manner in which Avery expressed disagreement with the school’s administration, Niehoff decided that Avery could not run for Senior Class Secretary because Avery’s conduct “…failed to display the civility and good citizenship expected of class officers.” Doninger sued, arguing Niehoff’s actions violated her First Amendment rights.

As the Second Circuit analyzed Doninger’s First Amendment claims, they began with Tinker, noting that students do not “shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate…. Yet while Tinker protected students’ speech rights, the court concluded that these rights, in the public school setting, were not equal to the free speech rights of adults. In fact, the court analyzed and discussed the student speech holdings of the United States Supreme Court and concluded that school administrators could prohibit student expression when certain circumstances were met. Utilizing the “foreseeable disruption test” articulated by Tinker, the Doninger Court stated:

173 Id. at 340.
174 Id. at 340-341.
175 Id. at 342.
176 Id. at 343-344.
177 Id. at 344.
178 Id.
179 Id.
The Supreme Court has yet to speak on the scope of the school’s authority to regulate expression that, like Avery’s, does not occur on school grounds or at a school sponsored event. We have determined, however, that a student may be disciplined for expressive conduct, even conduct occurring off school grounds, when this conduct “would foreseeably create a risk of substantial disruption within the school environment,” at least when it was similarly foreseeable that the off-campus expression might also reach campus.\footnote{Id.}

Meanwhile the Third Circuit Court of Appeals handed down, via two panels, two decisions on school speech cases on February 4, 2010.\footnote{See Layshock v. Hermitage Sch. Dist., 593 F.3d 249 (3rd Cir. 2010), vacated, reh’g en banc, 650 F.3d 205 (3rd Cir. 2011.) and Snyder v. Blue Mountain Sch. Dist., 593 F.3d 286 (3rd Cir. 2010), vacated, reh’g en banc, 650 F.3d 915 (3d Cir. 2011, cert. denied, 132 S.Ct. 1097 (2011.).} In two cases, involving seemingly similar facts, the two panels reached what appeared to be different results.\footnote{Paul Easton, Splitting the Difference: Layshock and J.S. Chart a Different Path on Student Speech Rights, 53 B.C.L. REV. E-SUPP. 17, 18 (2012.) See also Shannon P. Duffy, Do 3rd Circuit Rulings on MySpace Pages Contradict?, LAW.COM (July 19, 2012), http://www.law.com/jsp/law/LawArticleFriendly.jsp?id=1202442025383.} Consequently the Third Circuit Court of Appeals sat, \textit{en banc}, to rehear both cases.\footnote{Layshock v. Hermitage Sch. Dist., 650 F.3d 205 (3rd Cir. 2011.) The Court vacated both earlier panel opinions. Shortly after this decision was issued, Daniel J. Solove addressed the issue in a blog post. See Daniel J. Solove, School Discipline for Off Campus Speech and the First Amendment, HUFFINGTON POST (July 19, 2012), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-j-solove/school-discipline-free-speech_b_877203.html.}

In \textit{Layshock}, the initial panel, comprising Judges McKee, Smith and Roth,\footnote{Layshock v. Hermitage Sch. Dist., 593 F.3d 249 (3rd Cir. 2010.) Id. at 252.} framed the issue before the court as whether “…a school district can punish a student for expressive conduct that originated outside of the classroom, when that conduct did not disturb the school environment and was not related to any school sponsored event.”\footnote{Id.} Justin Layshock, a senior at Hickory High School in Hermitage, Pennsylvania, posted a parody profile of his high school principal, Eric Trosch, on his MySpace account while at his grandmother’s , using her computer.\footnote{Id.} While Justin copied and pasted Mr. Trosch’s photograph from the school’s web
site, that is the extent to which used a school resource was used. Justin’s parody gave bogus “big answers” to questions he pretended Mr. Trosch answered. Justin’s parody stated:

Birthday: too drunk to remember
Are you a health freak: big steroid freak
In the past month have you smoked: big blunt
In the past month have you been on pills: big pills
In the past month have you gone Skinny Dipping: big lake, not big dick
In the past month have you Stolen Anything: big keg
Ever been drunk: big number of times
Ever been called a Tease: big whore
Ever been Beaten up: big fag
Ever Shoplifted: big bag of kmart
Number of Drugs I have taken: big

Justin shared the profile with his friends at school who then shared with many other students. One of the other students was Mr. Trosch’s 11th grade daughter who then showed the profile to her father. The court noted that the profile spread through the school like “wildfire” and that students accessed the profile at school. Mr. Trosch explained he found the profile “degrading, demeaning, demoralizing, and shocking.” After an investigation, the school district suspended Justin for ten days, placed him in the Alternative Education Program for his last semester of high school, banned him from all extracurricular activities and refused to allow him to participate in his graduation ceremony. The school district concluded that Justin had violated Hermitage School District’s Discipline Code, finding “…[d]isruption of the normal school process; Disrespect; Harassment of a school administrator via computer/internet with
remarks that have demeaning implications; Gross misbehavior; Obscene, vulgar and profane language; Computer Policy violations (use of school pictures without authorization).”

Justin and his parents sued, arguing that the Hermitage School District had violated his First Amendment rights. The United States District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania agreed with Justin, granting him summary judgment. The Third Circuit panel, published their opinion on February 4, 2010, and affirmed the decision of the lower court, holding “…schools may punish expressive conduct that occurs outside of school as if it occurred inside the ‘schoolhouse gate’ under certain very limited circumstances, none of which are present here.”

On the same day, February 4, 2010, another panel of the Third Circuit, comprising Circuit Judges Fisher and Chagares and District Judge Diamond, published their opinion in Snyder v. Blue Mountain Sch. Dist. In Snyder, J.S., an 8th grader, created a MySpace profile parody of her high school principal, Mr. McGonigle, with another friend, K.L., from their home computers. As with Layshock, J.S. and K.L. copied a picture of Mr. McGonigle from the school’s web site and pasted it on their MySpace parody profile. While the profile did not identify McGonigle by name or location, it included his school photograph and described him as saying:

HELLO CHILDREN yes. it's your oh so wonderful, hairy, expressionless, sex addict, fagass, put on this world with a small dick PRINCIPAL. I have come to myspace so i can pervert the minds of other principal's to be just like me. I know, I know, you're all thrilled…Another reason I came to my space is because–I am

195 Id.
196 Id.
197 496 F. Supp. 2d 587, 606-607 (W.D. PA 2007.)
198 Layshock, 593 F.3d at 263.
199 Snyder v. Blue Mountain, 593 F.3d 286, 290 (3d Circ. 2010.) Judge Diamond, of the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, was sitting on the panel by designation.
200 Id.
201 Id.
202 Id. at 291
keeping an eye on you students (who i care for so much) For those who want to be my friend, and aren't in my school I love children, sex (any kind), dogs, long walks on the beach, tv, being a dick head, and last but not least my darling wife who looks like a man (who satisfies my needs) MY FRAINTRAIN so please, feel free to add me, message me whatever.

J.S. and K.L. left the profile “public” on Sunday night. By Monday afternoon, students at Blue Mountain Middle School had seen the profile and were discussing it so J.S. made the profile “private” when she went home. On Tuesday, a student at Blue Mountain approached McGoingle and told him about the profile. After McGoingle viewed the profile and discussed the issue with MySpace, he contacted the school superintendant, Joyce Romberger, and the Director of Technology, Susan Schneider-Morgan. After meeting and reviewing the profile, the three “concluded that it violated the School District's Acceptable Use Policy (“AUP”) because it violated copyright laws in misappropriating McGonigle's photograph from the School District's website without permission.”

McGoingle then met with J.S. and K.L. and their parents, telling them he was suspending them for ten days and also considering legal action. While students could not view the profile at school because MySpace was a blocked site, McGoingle testified that the profile parody disrupted school as students chattered about the profile in class and in the hallways, requiring extra student supervision. After the suspended students returned to school, they were greeted by fellow classmates who had decorated their lockers and offered them written congratulations for their behavior.
After the suspension, J.S. and her parents sued, arguing the Blue Mountain School District had violated her First Amendment rights. The United States District Court for the Eastern District Court of Pennsylvania decided in favor of the school, holding that the school did not violate the J.S.’s First Amendment rights when disciplining her because of the on campus impact of her “lewd and vulgar” speech. The Third Circuit’s panel affirmed the lower court’s decision. According to the court’s panel, Tinker’s “foreseeable” and “material and substantial disruption” test was the appropriate analysis to be applied to the facts. Certainty regarding a disruption was not required; rather the court indicated that the standard was the reasonable foreseeability of disruption that schools had to anticipate and protect students from. Schools were required to engage in a balancing analysis, balancing three rights: the right of students to be free from the invasion of their rights, the right of the students to avoid a “substantial disruption” at school, and the right of students to engage in protected First Amendment speech off campus which does impact on campus. Thus the court appeared to believe that Tinker required a balancing of the rights of the majority with the rights of an individual.

As the court’s panel applied this analysis to the facts of the case, it concluded that a substantial disruption was not created on campus by J.S.’s profile of McGoingle. However given the incendiary nature of the profile, i.e. indirectly suggesting that McGoingle engaged in pedophilic behavior with his students, the panel concluded that the school’s behavior did not

212 Id. at 294-295.
213 2008 WL 4279517 (E.D. PA 2008.)
214 Id. at 7.
215 Snyder, 593 F.3d at 308. In this panel opinion, Judge Chagares concurred in part with the decision and also dissented in part.
216 Id.
217 Id. at 298.
218 Id. at 299.
219 Id. at 298-300.
220 Id. at 299-300.
violate J.S.’s First Amendment rights as McGoingle’s actions forestalled the threat of future disruptions.\textsuperscript{221} This, the court indicated, satisfied the \textit{Tinker} test.\textsuperscript{222} The court refused to accept J.S.’s argument that off campus speech could not be regulated by school authorities.\textsuperscript{223} Instead it acknowledged the way that the evolving technology was blurring the boundaries between school and home and stated “…territoriality is not necessarily a useful concept in determining the limit of school administrators’ authority….\textsuperscript{224}

Given the similar facts of both cases and yet the dissimilar dispositions, the Third Circuit agreed to hear the cases \textit{en banc} and did so in June of 2010.\textsuperscript{225} A year later, in June of 2011, the court published both opinions.\textsuperscript{226}

\textit{Layshock} was affirmed and upheld the holding of the initial panel, published in February of 2010.\textsuperscript{227} The \textit{en banc} court held that the school had violated Justin Layshock’s First Amendment rights.\textsuperscript{228} After reviewing and reconciling several cases cited by the school district, including \textit{Doninger} and \textit{Wisniewski},\textsuperscript{229} the Layshock \textit{en banc} court concluded that school officials have very limited authority, according to the application of \textit{Tinker} and \textit{Fraser}, to punish off campus student speech.\textsuperscript{230} Quoting \textit{Thomas v. Bd. of Ed., Granville Cent. Sch. Dist.},\textsuperscript{231} the court stated that “…our willingness to defer to the schoolmaster’s expertise in administering

\textsuperscript{221} Id. at 300–302.
\textsuperscript{222} Id. at 303.
\textsuperscript{223} Id. at 301.
\textsuperscript{224} Id.
\textsuperscript{225} Layshock v. Hermitage Sch. Dist., 593 F.3d 249 (3rd Circ. 2010), \textit{vacated, reh’g en banc}, 650 F. 3d 205 (3rd Circ. 2011.) \textit{See also} Snyder v. Blue Mountain, 593 F.3d 286 (3rd Circ. 2020), \textit{vacated, reh’g en banc}, 650 F.3d 915 (3rd Circ. 2011), \textit{cert. denied} 132 S.Ct. 1097 (2012.)
\textsuperscript{226} See Layshock, 650 F.3d at 205; \textit{see also} Snyder, 650 F.3d at 915.
\textsuperscript{227} Layshock, 650 F.3d at 219.
\textsuperscript{228} Id.
\textsuperscript{229} The Court distinguishes the facts in Layshock from \textit{Doninger} and \textit{Wisniewski} as well as other cases. Id. at 216-218.
\textsuperscript{230} Id. at 219.
\textsuperscript{231} \textit{Thomas v. Bd. of Ed., Granville Cent. Sch. Dist.}, 607 F. 2d 1043 (C.D. NY 1979.)
school discipline rests, in large measure, upon the supposition that the arm of authority does not reach beyond the schoolhouse gate….”

The court said that it was unnecessary to define the parameters of school authorities regarding off campus student speech since Justin’s speech clearly did not substantially or materially disrupt the school’s activities. Without a substantial disruption, \textit{Tinker} was not applicable. The court concluded that while \textit{Fraser} allowed school authorities to discipline student speech that was “lewd” or “vulgar,” this authority was limited to on campus lewd or vulgar speech. Discussing the applicability of \textit{Fraser}, the court stated “…\textit{Fraser} does not allow the School District to punish Justin for expressive conduct that occurred outside of the school context.” This holding seems to be at odds with the court panel’s holding in \textit{Snyder v. Blue Mountain} which announced that territoriality was not the defining factor when determining the reach of school authorities to regulate off campus student speech.

In \textit{Snyder v. Blue Mountain}, the \textit{en banc} court remanded the decision to the district court, reversing in part and affirming in part. While the court concluded that the school’s disciplinary policies were not facially unconstitutional as J.S. and her parents alleged, it reversed the holding that the school could punish J.S.’s speech. Noting that schools could suppress or punish student speech in certain situations, the court stated “[t]he authority of public school officials is not boundless….” The court then engaged in a discussion as to what the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{232} Id. at 1045.
  \item \textsuperscript{233} Layshock, 650 F.3d at 219.
  \item \textsuperscript{234} Id. at 216.
  \item \textsuperscript{235} Id. at 217-219.
  \item \textsuperscript{236} Id. at 219.
  \item \textsuperscript{237} Snyder, 593 F.3d at 301.
  \item \textsuperscript{238} Snyder v. Blue Mountain, 650 F.3d 915, 936, (3d Circ. 2011), \textit{cert. denied}, 132 S.Ct. 197 (2012.) As with the \textit{en banc} opinion published in \textit{Layshock}, this opinion involved concurrences and a dissent.
  \item \textsuperscript{239} Id. at 936.
  \item \textsuperscript{240} Id. at 932-933.
  \item \textsuperscript{241} Id. at 926.
\end{itemize}
Supreme Court’s basic analysis was when reviewing student speech punishment arguments, discussing *Tinker*’s “substantial disruption” requirement and noting the further exceptions created by *Fraser, Hazelwood* and *Morse*.242

An examination of the court’s analysis indicated that while the court acknowledged that a school could suppress or punish student speech in the public school setting, school officials must demonstrate the following in order to prevail in court:

- show that the forbidden speech or conduct
- would materially and substantially interfere with the appropriate discipline in the operation of the school.243

The court noted that “…[s]chools cannot satisfy this burden if they cannot demonstrate more than the ‘desire to avoid the discomfort and unpleasantness that always accompanies an unpopular viewpoint.’”244 When examining the implications and applications of *Fraser, Hazelwood* and *Morse*, the court concluded that if *Tinker* was not applicable, then there was no need to establish a substantial disruption and instead the *Fraser, Hazelwood, or Morse* exceptions applied.245 The court said that *Fraser* allowed schools to discipline school speech, categorized as lewd or vulgar, when a captive audience was involved246 while *Hazelwood* allowed discipline, for pedagogical reasons, of school sponsored speech.247 If neither of those categories was applicable, *Morse* then established that speech, even if off campus but at a school sponsored event which advocated illegal drug use, could also be punished.248 Applying this analysis to the facts of the case, the court concluded that none of the exceptions articulated by

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242 Id. at 925-933.
243 Id. at 926.
244 Id.
245 Id. at 926-927.
246 Id. at 927.
247 Id.
248 Id.
Fraser, Hazelwood or Morse were applicable.\textsuperscript{249} Thus Tinker would be the only standard by which the school could punish J.S.’s speech.\textsuperscript{250} However the court concluded that the school did not meet the “substantial disruption” test of Tinker as the school had conceded in the district court that no substantial disruption occurred.\textsuperscript{251} Furthermore, the court said that J.S.’s profile of McGonigle was so “outrageous” that no one could or would have “taken it seriously.”\textsuperscript{252} Thus it was not “reasonably foreseeable” that a “substantial disruption” would occur.\textsuperscript{253} In this way, the court concluded that Snyder v. Blue Mountain was distinguishable from Doninger and Wisnieswki.\textsuperscript{254}

The Fourth Circuit also addressed this issue in July of 2011 with its decision in Kowalski v. Berkeley Cnty. Sch.\textsuperscript{255} Kara Kowalski, then a senior at Musselman High School, created a MySpace page at home with her home computer, naming the page “S.A.S.H.” which she said stood for “No No Herpes. We don’t want no herpes.”\textsuperscript{256} She invited one hundred or so of her friends to join the group page; of this number, approximately twenty-four were students from Musselman High.\textsuperscript{257} A friend and classmate at Musselman, Ray Parsons, joined the group the day the page was created.\textsuperscript{258} He then uploaded a picture of himself, holding his nose with a sign that said “Shay Has Herpes.”\textsuperscript{259} This was a reference to another Mussleman classmate, Shay N. According to the court, Ray “…had drawn red dots on Shay N.’s face to simulate herpes and added a sign near her pelvic region, that read, ‘Warning: Enter at your own risk.’” In the second

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{249} Id. at 932.
\bibitem{250} Id. at 931-933.
\bibitem{251} Id. at 930-932.
\bibitem{252} Id. at 930.
\bibitem{253} Id. at 930-931.
\bibitem{254} Id. at 930.
\bibitem{255} 652 F.3d 565 (4\textsuperscript{th} Cir. 2011), cert. denied, 132 S.Ct. 1095 (2012.)
\bibitem{256} Id. at 567.
\bibitem{257} Id.
\bibitem{258} Id. at 568.
\bibitem{259} Id.
\end{thebibliography}
photograph, he captioned Shay N.’s face with a sign that read, “portrait of a whore.” Shay N. learned of the page later that evening. Her father contacted Ray, expressing anger and demanding that the page be taken down. Kara and Ray tried to comply but were unable to remove the page.

The next day, Shay and her parents went to Musselman High School where they met with the Vice Principal, Becky Harden. They filed a complaint of harassment with the school, and Shay then returned home, missing school because she was uncomfortable attending classes with students who had posted comments about her on Kowalski’s MySpace page. Ronald Stephens, the school’s principal, contacted the central school board to determine whether this was the type of behavior that should subject students to school discipline. The office responded affirmatively so the school then conducted an investigation, interviewing the students involved with creating, posting and viewing the web site. After the investigation, the school concluded that Kowalski had created a “hate website” that was in violation of the Berkeley Board of Education’s Harassment, Bullying and Intimidation Policy and its Student Code of Conduct. The Harassment Policy defined bullying as

… any intentional gesture, or any intention written or verbal or physical act that 1. A reasonable person under the circumstances should know will have the effect of a. harming a student or staff member; 2. Is sufficiently inappropriate, severe, persistent, or pervasive that it creates an intimidating, threatening, or abusive education environment for a student.

260 Id.
261 Id.
262 Id.
263 Id.
264 Id.
265 Id.
266 Id.
267 Id. at 569.
268 Id.
269 Id.
The Student Code of Conduct required “…(a)all students…shall behave in a safe manner that promotes a school environment that is nurturing, orderly, safe and conducive to learning and personal social development.” Violators of either policy were subject to various punishments; one such punishment was a ten day suspension. Applying the harassment and conduct policies to the facts, Stephens and Harden then suspended Kowalski from school for ten days and also issued a ninety day social suspension from school extra-curricular activities.  

Kowalski sued, arguing that the school had violated her First Amendment free speech rights. She argued that the school had disciplined her for “off –campus, non school related speech” for which it had neither the right nor the authority to punish her. The United States District Court for the Northern District of West Virginia disagreed, and Kowalski appealed their ruling to the Fourth Circuit.

The Fourth Circuit defined the issue facing it as “…whether Kowalski’s activity fell within the outer boundaries of the high school’s legitimate interest in maintaining order in the school and protecting the well-being and educational rights of students.” Concluding it did, the court affirmed the district court’s decision, upholding the school’s punishment of Kowalski. While acknowledging that “(t)here is surely a limit to the scope of a high school’s interest in the order, safety, and well-being of its students when the speech…originates outside the schoolhouse gate” the court concluded, citing DeJohn v. Temple University, that “the

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270 Id.
271 Id.
272 Id.
273 Id. at 570.
274 Id.
275 Id.
276 Id.
277 Id.
278 Id. at 574.
279 Id. at 573.
language of Tinker supports the conclusion that schools have a ‘compelling interest’ in regulating speech that interferes with or disrupts the work and discipline of the school, including discipline for student harassment and bullying.”^281 The court stated that while the United States Supreme Court had not yet dealt with a case in which one student targeted another student for verbal abuse, it felt certain that Tinker would permit discipline for such speech as it “disrupts classwork, creates substantial disorder or collides with or invades the rights of others.”^282 According to the court, the fact that the student speech involved occurred off campus was not determinative of the ability of school administrators to impose discipline.\(^283\) Rather the court stressed that Tinker permitted the school’s discipline because Tinker allowed schools to intervene where student speech “materially and substantially” interfered with school work and invaded the rights of others to be “let alone.”^284 Since Kowalski’s speech targeted a classmate, the court proclaimed that it was “reasonably foreseeable” that the speech would impact students while at school and create substantial disruption.\(^285\)

The last circuit court decision involved school discipline of a student for off campus speech that was eventually held to constitute a threat.\(^286\) D.J.M. v. Hannibal Public Sch. Dist. was decided by the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit.\(^287\) This case differs from Wisniewski, Doninger, Layshock, Snyder and Kowalski in that it involved behavior by a student that did appear to constitute a threat of physical violence against other students.\(^288\)

While the other five decisions involved off campus student speech directed at school personnel
or students whose behavior was disliked, *D.J.M.* involved behavior that was perceived to constitute an actual threat to the physical well being of school personnel and students.\(^{289}\)

*D.J.M.* involved a decision in which a student, Dylan Mardis, was chatting via Instant Message with another classmate, C. M.\(^{290}\) During the chat, Mardis told C.M. that he was going to get a gun and kill certain classmates.\(^{291}\) He named specific students that he would “…get rid of….”\(^{292}\) Named individuals included “…a particular boy along with his older brother and some individual members of groups he did not like, namely ‘midget[s,]’ ‘fags’ and ‘negro bitches.’”\(^{293}\) Concerned, C.M. contacted a school administrator, forwarding Dylan’s emails.\(^{294}\) This resulted in Mardis being arrested by the police and detained in the psychiatric ward of the Lakeland Regional Hospital for a month.\(^{295}\) After his release from the hospital, Mardis attempted to return to school, but he was initially suspended for ten days for making threats.\(^{296}\) After numerous parents expressed concern and demanded action, a school board hearing resulted in the suspension of Mardis for the remainder of the school year.\(^{297}\)

While Mardis argued that the school suspension violated his First Amendment free speech, the school disputed this, arguing that Mardis’ speech constituted a threat which violated the school’s conduct policy\(^{298}\) and was not protected by the First Amendment.\(^{299}\) The United States District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri held that “…the evidence before the Court is that school was substantially disrupted because of Plaintiff’s threats. Under the Tinker

\(^{289}\) Id.
\(^{290}\) Id. at 757-758.
\(^{291}\) Id. at 758.
\(^{292}\) Id.
\(^{293}\) Id.
\(^{294}\) Id. at 759.
\(^{295}\) Id.
\(^{296}\) Id.
\(^{297}\) Id.
\(^{298}\) Id.
\(^{299}\) Id. at 759-760.
test, Defendants could punish Plaintiff for his disruptive statements without violating his First Amendment rights. The United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit upheld the lower court’s decision, concluding “[t]rue threats are not protected under the First Amendment…here…[the school] was given enough information that it reasonably feared D.J.M. had access to a handgun and was thinking about shooting specific classmates at the high school.”

Three of the above decisions, Doninger, Snyder, and Kowalski, were appealed to the United States Supreme Court during the 2011-2012 term. Despite what appears to be confusion, or some would term a circuit split, the Court denied certiorari in all three cases.

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300 Mardis v. Hannibal Public Sch. Dist., 684 F. Supp. 1115, 1124 (E.D. MO 2010.)
301 D.J.M., 647 F.3d at 764.
302 Martha McCarthy, Student Electronic Expression: Unanswered Questions Persist, 277 ED. L. REP. 1 (April 2012.) See also Philip T.K. Daniel, A Need to Sharpen the Contours of Off Campus Student Speech, 273 ED. L. REP. 21 (December 2011.)
303 See Doninger v. Niehoff, 642 F.3d 344 (2nd Circ. 2011), cert. denied, 132 S.Ct. 499 (2011), Snyder v. Blue Mountain 650 F.3d 915 (3d Circ. 2011), cert. denied, 132 S.Ct. 197 (2012), and Kowalski v. Berkeley Cnty. Sch., 652 F.3d 565 (4th Circ. 2011), cert. denied, 132 S.Ct. 1095 (2012.). In her petition to the United States Supreme Court for certiorari, Avery Doninger, citing Layshock and Snyder v. Blue Mountain among other cases, argued that the “divergent holdings” among the Second and Third Circuits represented an “actual concrete split…which this Court should resolve sooner rather than later.” See Brief for Avery Doninger, Petitioner, Doninger v. Niehoff, 132 S.Ct. 499 (2011) (No.11-113), 2011 WL 3151990. Meanwhile, Niehoff, in the Respondent’s Brief in Opposition, argued that Doninger’s behavior satisfied the Tinker standard of “substantial disruption” and denied that a conflict between the circuits existed. See Brief for Karissa Niehoff, Respondent’s Brief in Opposition, Doninger v. Niehoff, 132 S.Ct. 499 (2011) (No. 11-113), 2011 WL 4518474. Blue Mountain School District also filed a petition, requesting certiorari. See Brief for Blue Mountain Sch. Dist., Petitioner, Blue Mountain Sch. Dist. v. Snyder, 132 S.Ct. 1097 (2011) (No.11-502), 2011 WL 5014761. Citing both the en banc and panel decisions of the Third Circuit, Blue Mountain argued there was not only a circuit split, but also a deepening split within the Third Circuit. The school also argued that lower district courts were split on the issue as to whether Tinker’s standard applied to student speech that originated off campus. Interestingly enough, J.S./Snyder’s Respondent’s Brief in Opposition argued, as did the school’s brief in Doninger, there was no split among the courts as they applied Tinker to off campus student speech. See Brief for J.S., Respondent’s Brief in Opposition, Blue Mountain Sch. Dist. v. Snyder, 132 S.Ct. 1097 (2011) (No.11-502), 2011 WL 6396572. Kowalski too petitioned the United States Supreme Court for certiorari, arguing as did the Blue Mountain School District, that there was a split among the courts as to whether Tinker applied to off campus speech, not directed at the school. She also requested that the Court clarify the meaning of Tinker’s “substantial disruption.” See Brief for Kara Kowalski, Petitioner, Kowalski v. Berkeley County Sch., 132 S.Ct. 1095 (2011) (No.11-461), 2011 WL 4874091. Berkeley School District responded, arguing as did the student, J.S. in Blue Mountain, there was no circuit court split and that the Fourth Circuit had applied the First Amendment analysis as intended. See Brief for Berkeley County Sch., Respondent’s Brief in Opposition, Kowalski v. Berkeley County Sch., 132 S.Ct. 1095 (2011) (No. 11-461), 2011 WL 6257241. The Marion B. Brechner First Amendment Project, the Alliance Defense Fund and Liberty Institute, and the Rutherford Institute all filed Amicus Curiae briefs to support Kowalski, urging the Court to hear the case and clarify the analysis. See Brief
Decisions from United States District Courts: More Confusion?

If the decisions from the United States Courts of Appeals for the Second, Third, Fourth, and Eighth Circuits appear confusing and inconsistent, an examination of nine decisions rendered by various United States District Courts across the country between 2002 – 2011 and the Pennsylvania Supreme Court reveals more inconsistency. This section reviews eight cases decided by United States District Courts, in reverse chronological order, and a decision from the Pennsylvania Supreme Court that involved school discipline of what originated as off campus student cyber-speech.

Most recently, the United States District Court for the Northern District of Indiana issued an opinion in *T.V. v. Smith-Green Cnty. Sch.* In *T.V.*, several teen-age girls at Churubusco High School, who played on the school’s volley ball team, held slumber parties. At these parties, T.V. and other girls posed for various pictures that the court described as “raunchy.”

The girls posted pictures of themselves licking phallic shaped rainbow colored lollipops, sticking trident shaped objects in their crotches and buttocks, and kneeling beside one another as if engaging in anal sex on Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. The pictures came to the attention of other classmates who also played on the volley ball team. Some classmates disapproved

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305 Id. at 772.
306 Id.
307 Id. at 771-772.
308 Id.
and then showed the web pages to their parents. Some parents then contacted the school and the volleyball coach to complain about T.V. and M.K. being allowed to play on the volleyball team. After reviewing the school’s extracurricular policy which required that students demonstrate “good conduct at school and outside of school….If you act in a manner in school or out of school that brings discredit or dishonor upon yourself or your school, you may be removed from extracurricular activities…,” the school suspended T.V. and M.K. from participating in extracurricular activities, i.e. playing on the volleyball team, for part of the school year. While the girls argued the school was violated their First Amendment rights, the school stated “(t)he basis for the suspension was the determination that the photographs were inappropriate, and that by posing for them, and posting them on the internet, the students were reflecting discredit upon the school.” Acknowledging that “the speech in this case doesn’t exactly call to mind high-minded civic discourse about current events….” the court agreed with T.V. that her First Amendment rights had been violated. After concluding that T.V.’s photographs were indeed speech, protected by the First Amendment, the court then rejected the school’s argument that the photographs were obscene and constituted child pornography. Having concluded that the speech was protected, the court then applied Fraser and Tinker to determine whether T.V.’s posting of photographs on Facebook could be punished by school officials. Since the speech was off campus, the court concluded that Fraser was not applicable. Concluding that Tinker

309 Id.
310 Id. at 772-773.
311 Id. at 773.
312 Id. at 773-774.
313 Id. at 774.
314 Id. at 771.
315 Id. at 790.
316 Id. at 776.
317 Id. at 779.
318 Id. 779-783.
319 Id. at 779.
was the appropriate standard to be applied, the court noted that *Tinker’s* “substantial disruption” test was not met.\(^{320}\) The court stated “…no reasonable jury could conclude that the photos of T.V. and M.K. posted on the internet caused a substantial disruption to school activities, or that there was a reasonably foreseeable chance of future substantial disruption” since only a few parents had complained.\(^{321}\) The court noted that “substantial disruption” required more than the “ordinary personality conflicts” among school children.\(^{322}\)

In 2010, three student cyber-speech cases, *Evans v. Bayer*,\(^{323}\) *J.C. v. Beverly Hills Unified Sch. Dist.*,\(^{324}\) and *Mardis v. Hannibal Public Sch. Dist.*,\(^{325}\) involved school punishment of students for off campus cyber-speech. Stretching from coast to coast and including the heartland, the decisions ranged, in geography, from the Southern District of Florida to the Central District of California, with a stop in Missouri to demonstrate student cyber-speech was an issue across America rather than just an urban bi-coastal problem.

The *Evans* decision involved Katherine Evans, a high school senior at Pembroke Pines Charter School, who created a Facebook page and named it “Ms. Sarah Phelps is the worst teacher I’ve ever met.”\(^{326}\) She invited students to “express your feelings of hatred” about Ms. Phelps at the site.\(^{327}\) While the page included Ms. Phelps’ photograph, it did not contain threats of violence.\(^{328}\) Students posted to the site, supporting Ms. Phelps while dismissing Evans’

\(^{320}\) Id. at 783-784.

\(^{321}\) Id. at 784-785.

\(^{322}\) Id. at 784.

\(^{323}\) Evans v. Bayer, 684 F. Supp.2d 1365 (S.D. Fla. 2010.)


\(^{325}\) Mardis v. Hannibal Public Sch. Dist., 684 F. Supp.2d 1114 (E.D. MO 2010.) Mardis was appealed to the Eighth Circuit where an opinion was issued. *See* D.J.M. v. Hannibal Public Sch. Dist., 647 F. 3d 754 (8th Cir. 2011.) For a discussion of the case and the opinion of the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit, *see infra*, notes 286-301.

\(^{326}\) Evans, 684 F.Supp.2d at 1367.

\(^{327}\) Id.

\(^{328}\) Id.
comments. Two days later, Evans removed the post, but she did not do so before it came to Peter Bayer’s attention. Bayer, the high school principal, reviewed the post and concluded that Evans had violated the school policy regarding “bullying/harassment towards a staff member and disruptive behavior.” Because of this, he suspended Evans for three days and removed her from her Advanced Placement classes.

Evans sued, arguing she was punished by the school for exercising her First Amendment speech rights. The court framed the issue as “…whether the fact that Plaintiff’s speech was arguably aimed at a particular audience at the school is enough by itself to label the speech on-campus speech.” Analyzing the facts under Tinker and applying the Morse Quartet’s holdings, the court found that Evans’ First Amendment rights had been violated, concluding “…Evans's speech falls under the wide umbrella of protected speech. It was an opinion of a student about a teacher, that was published off-campus, did not cause any disruption on-campus, and was not lewd, vulgar, threatening, or advocating illegal or dangerous behavior.”

J.C. v. Beverley Hills involved student on student misbehavior. In J.C., J.C. and several of her classmates went to a restaurant after school ended. While there, they discussed and made comments about classmates. A classmate, C.C., who was not present at the restaurant, was called a “slut,” “spoiled,” and the “ugliest piece of shit I’ve ever seen in my

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329 Id.
330 Id. at 1367-1368.
331 Id.
332 Id.
333 Id. at 1368.
334 Id. at 1371.
335 Id. at 1374.
336 J.C., 711 F. Supp.2d at 1098.
337 Id.
338 Id.
whole life.” While this conversation ensued, J.C. recorded it with her video camera. After she went home, she then uploaded the 4 ½ minute video rant against C.C. and posted it on YouTube. She invited 5 to 10 students from Beverly Hills High to view it. She also contacted C.C. directly, telling her to view it. C.C. viewed it, was upset and took her mother in to complain to the principal the next day. The students who viewed the video did so from their homes with home computers since access to YouTube was blocked at school. The school investigated and consulted the local director for Pupil Personnel for the District. The director indicated that the student could be suspended; the school then suspended J.C. for two days.

J.C. sued the school district, arguing the school violated her First Amendment rights. The school district disagreed, arguing J.C.’s conduct caused a “substantial disruption” as required by Tinker. The court reviewed and examined Tinker, Fraser, Hazelwood and Morse, concluding that Tinker’s analysis governed. The court rejected J.C.’s geography based argument, holding that Tinker was applicable to both on and off campus student speech. In their analysis, the court emphasized the importance of the “substantial disruption” test in determining whether schools could regulate off campus student speech. Applying Tinker to the facts of the case, the court concluded that J.C.’s conduct was “too de minimis” to constitute a

339 Id.
340 Id.
341 Id.
342 Id.
343 Id.
344 Id.
345 Id. at 1100.
346 Id.
347 Id.
348 Id. at 1097.
349 Id. at 1117-1118.
350 Id. at 1100-1102.
351 Id. at 1107-1008.
352 Id. at 1115-1117.
“substantial disruption.”

Rather Tinker’s “substantial disruption” required “something more than the ordinary personality conflicts among middle school students that may leave one student feeling hurt or insecure.” Thus the school could not punish J.C.’s speech since it failed to satisfy Tinker’s substantial disruption test.

While the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit later weighed in and upheld the lower court’s decision in *D.J.M. v. Hannibal Public Sch. Dist.*, this section will offer a brief discussion of the decision in the case from the lower court. *Mardis v. Hannibal Sch. Dist.* came out of Missouri. It involved an off campus student email exchange, via Instant Message, between Dylan Mardis and a classmate, Carly Moore. During the chat, Mardis told Moore that he was “going to get a gun and kill certain classmates.” Moore was truly concerned so she contacted a school administrator. The school contacted the police who then arrested Mardis and detained him in the psychiatric ward of the Lakeland Regional Hospital. Once released, Mardis attempted to return to school but he was initially suspended for ten days for making threats. A school board hearing then resulted in his suspension for the remainder of the school year.

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353 Id. at 1117.
354 Id. at 1118.
355 Id. at 1117-1118.
358 Id.
359 Id.
360 Id.
361 Id.
362 Id.
363 Id.
364 Id. at 1115-1116.
Angry, Mardis sued the school district, arguing that his emails did not constitute “true threats,” and thus the school’s suspension violated his First Amendment free speech. The school disputed this, arguing that Mardis’ speech constituted a threat which was not protected by the First Amendment. The court agreed with the school district.

In 2007, the United States District Court for the Western District of Washington dealt with off campus student cyber-speech in *Requa v. Kent School District*. Gregory Requa was a high school junior at Kentridge High School when he allegedly surreptitiously recorded his high school teacher in her classroom. While standing behind Ms. M., Requa made faces, put up rabbit ears, and made pelvic thrusts in her direction. He filmed the teacher’s buttocks and referred to them as “booty.” He then edited the recording, adding commentary about the teacher’s hygiene. He uploaded and posted the recording to YouTube where it languished until a local Seattle news station did a story about high school students who posted videos to YouTube that were critical of teachers. During the development of this story, the reporter contacted the Kentridge administration for comment. The news station then included Requa’s YouTube clip in its broadcast to the Seattle area.

The school then conducted an investigation to satisfy its administrative policies and determine which student, either Requa or S.W., had made the recordings. Requa denied that he had been involved in the filming, editing or posting of the video but four unnamed students

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365 Id. at 1124.
366 Id. at 1119.
367 Id. at 1124.
369 Id. at 1274.
370 Id.
371 Id.
372 Id.
373 Id.
374 Id.
375 Id.
376 Id. at 1274-1275.
disputed this.\textsuperscript{377} The school then suspended Requa for forty days, indicating his suspension resulted from the filming of Ms. M. in class.\textsuperscript{378} The school’s handbook prohibited “sexual harassment” and the school concluded that the pelvic thrusts and shots of Ms. M’s buttocks constituted sexual harassment.\textsuperscript{379} A school hearing and the school board upheld the punishment.\textsuperscript{380}

Requa sued, alleging violation of his First Amendment rights, arguing he had a right to criticize his teacher.\textsuperscript{381} The school district again affirmed its defense which was that Requa was punished for his behavior in class, i.e. secretly filming the teacher, rather than his Internet posting.\textsuperscript{382} The court established that \textit{Tinker’s} “substantial disruption” was the applicable test to determine whether Requa’s in class behavior was protected speech.\textsuperscript{383} Examining Requa’s behavior which consisted of standing behind a teacher in class and filming her while making rabbit ears and pelvic thrusts, the court concluded that Requa’s behavior satisfied \textit{Tinker’s} “substantial disruption” test.\textsuperscript{384} Thus his speech was unlikely to be “protected” speech within the meaning of \textit{Tinker}.\textsuperscript{385} Ultimately the school prevailed as the court noted that Requa’s “…admitted free speech activities outside the classroom—posting a link to the YouTube video on the internet—are protected speech and the school district agrees that he may not be disciplined for his out-of-school expression of his viewpoint.”\textsuperscript{386} This is an example of the existing confusion about the application of \textit{Tinker} to off campus student cyber-speech. While the United States District Court for the Central District of California says that \textit{Tinker} is

\textsuperscript{377} Id. at 1275.
\textsuperscript{378} Id. at 1275-1276.
\textsuperscript{379} Id.
\textsuperscript{380} Id. at 1276-1278.
\textsuperscript{381} Id. at 1279.
\textsuperscript{382} Id. at 1277-1278.
\textsuperscript{383} Id. at 1279-1281.
\textsuperscript{384} Id. at 1280.
\textsuperscript{385} Id. at 1281.
\textsuperscript{386} Id.
applicable to off campus student speech that arrives on campus, the United States District Court for the Western District of Washington indicates that *Tinker* is not applicable to off campus student speech.

In 2002, the United States District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania confronted an off campus student cyber-speech issue in *Flaherty v. Keystone Oaks Sch. Dist.*[^387] Jack Flaherty posted three messages, two from home and one from school, to a public message board, discussing, in juvenile terms, his school’s volleyball team[^388]. Once the school coaches learned of the postings, they suspended Flaherty from the volleyball team, using a *Discipline* policy that defined *harassment* as “…any ongoing pattern of *abuse*, whether physical or verbal. Inappropriate language/verbal abuse (may be considered “Attack”) toward an employee….or…- Inappropriate language/verbal abuse toward another student .”[^389] Flaherty sued, arguing the school policies used to punish his off campus conduct and speech were “overreaching” and “unconstitutionally overbroad and vague so that they fail to limit a school official’s authority to discipline….“[^390] Examining the school’s policy in light of the mandates of *Tinker*, the court concluded that the *Discipline* policy was both overbroad and vague in its definition and application.[^391] The court announced that the policy failed to follow *Tinker’s* mandate and limit the authority of the school to discipline student expression except in cases of “substantial disruption.”[^392] Instead the court stated that the *Discipline* policy “could be interpreted to

[^388]: Id. at 700-701.
[^389]: Id. 701.
[^390]: Id. at 705-706.
[^391]: Id. at 705.
[^392]: Id.
prohibit a substantial amount of protected speech.”

Thus the court granted Flaherty’s motion for summary judgment.

In 2002, two federal district court cases involved student cyber-speech as did a decision from the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. *Coy v. Bd. of Ed. of North Canton City Sch.* involved a middle school student named Jon Coy. While at home, using his own computer, Coy created a web site, posting pictures and biographical information about himself and some of his school friends. The site also contained a section named “losers” and included pictures of classmates with derogatory sentences under the photos. Specifically the losers’ section contained “…pictures of three boys who attended the North Canton Middle School….Most objectionable was a sentence describing one boy as being sexually aroused by his mother.” Middle school students learned of the web site and eventually reported it to the math teacher who reported it to the principal, Mr. Stanley. Nothing was done until Coy accessed the web site from the school’s computer lab. After that, Stanley suspended Coy for four days for violating the school’s *Code of Conduct* and *Computer Use Policy*. The school found that Coy violated the following portion of the *Code of Conduct*: “…[i]nappropriate Action or Behavior: Any action or behavior judged by school officials to be inappropriate and not specifically mentioned in other sections shall be in violation of the Student Conduct Code.”

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393 Id. at 706.
394 Id.
396 Id. at 794.
397 Id. at 795.
398 Id.
399 Id.
400 Id.
401 Id. at 795-796.
402 Id.
403 Id. at 795.
Coy and his parents sued.\textsuperscript{404} Coy argued that the school disciplined him, not for viewing the web site at school, but rather for the content of the web site which was created off campus and thus constituted protected speech under \textit{Tinker}.\textsuperscript{405} The school disputed this, saying that it punished Coy because he violated school policy.\textsuperscript{406} Discussing both \textit{Tinker’s} and \textit{Fraser’s} requirements, the court refused to grant the school summary judgment, indicating that it must demonstrate a “substantial disruption” in order to discipline Coy’s speech.\textsuperscript{407}

In November of 2002, the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan also dealt with a student cyber-speech issue in \textit{Mahaffey v. Aldrich}.\textsuperscript{408} Joshua Mahaffey, a high school student, created a web site with another student and named it “Satan’s web page.”\textsuperscript{409} The site stated “…[s]tab someone for no reason then set them on fire throw them off of a cliff, watch them suffer and with their last breath, just before everything goes black, spit on their face. Killing people is wrong don’t do It [sic]. unless [sic] Im [sic] there to watch.”\textsuperscript{410}

A parent of another student at the school learned of the web site and reported it to the police.\textsuperscript{411} The police investigated and were told that computers at the high school may have been used to create the web site.\textsuperscript{412} The police then notified the school.\textsuperscript{413} The school then began an investigation, and Mahaffey indicated that he created the web site “for laughs” and because he was “bored.”\textsuperscript{414} The school’s investigation centered upon Mahaffey’s conduct that was allegedly
violate the school’s *Conduct Policy*.\textsuperscript{415} After the investigation, the principal, Carol Baldwin, recommended expulsion because Mahaffey’s behavior violated the school’s *Conduct Policy* which prohibited “behavior dangerous to the self and others.”\textsuperscript{416} The school then expelled him but offered to provide a hearing.\textsuperscript{417} Mahaffey did not avail himself of the hearing but rather enrolled in another school.\textsuperscript{418}

Mahaffey sued, arguing that the school’s conduct violated his First Amendment rights.\textsuperscript{419} The court, applying the *Tinker* analysis, agreed with Mahaffey.\textsuperscript{420} When analyzing and applying *Tinker*, the court concluded that Mahaffey’s activity had to have occurred on or with school property; in addition to the geography requirement, Mahaffey’s behavior must then have created a “substantial disruption” to the work of the school.\textsuperscript{421} Only after establishing this could the school discipline Mahaffey for his speech.\textsuperscript{422} Applying *Tinker* to the facts at hand, the court announced that the school produced no evidence that Mahaffey used school equipment to make his web site nor had it established that Mahaffey communicated its existence to others at the school.\textsuperscript{423} It stated “regulation of Plaintiff’s speech on the website without any proof of disruption to the school or on campus activity in the creation of the website was a violation of Plaintiff’s First Amendment rights. Therefore, Plaintiff’s motion for summary judgment shall be granted on his free speech and free expression claim.”\textsuperscript{424}

\textsuperscript{415} Id.\textsuperscript{416} The school advised Mahaffey that “based upon the admitted and alleged violation of Categories 5-Behavior Dangerous to Self and Others, 23-Internet Violations and 24-Intimidation and Threats of the Waterford School District Code of Conduct” he was being expelled. Id.\textsuperscript{417} Id. at 783.\textsuperscript{418} Id.\textsuperscript{419} Id. at 781.\textsuperscript{420} Id. at 786.\textsuperscript{421} Id.\textsuperscript{422} Id.\textsuperscript{423} Id.\textsuperscript{424} Id.
The last case discussed in this section involved a decision handed down by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in *J.S. v. Bethlehem Area Sch. Dist.* in 2002.\(^\text{425}\) J.S., an 8th grade student, created a web site on his home computer from home and titled it “Teacher Sux.”\(^\text{426}\) It made derogatory comments about the school’s algebra teacher, Mrs. Fulmer, and the school principal.\(^\text{427}\) On the web site J.S. posted a question that asked “Why Should She Die?”\(^\text{428}\) Beneath the heading, J.S. then requested “… $20 to help pay for the hitman.”\(^\text{429}\) In addition to other comments and diagrams, the final page of the web site showed a “…drawing of Mrs. Fulmer with her head cut off and blood dripping from her neck.”\(^\text{430}\) Virtually everyone at the school viewed the web site.\(^\text{431}\) Mrs. Fulmer testified that the web site frightened her, and that she was afraid someone would try to kill her.\(^\text{432}\) She went on medical leave which meant that three substitute teachers had to finish teaching her class, creating a substantial disruption in the educational process.\(^\text{433}\)

While the school knew of the web site before the school year ended in May, it did not take action until July.\(^\text{434}\) In July, the school notified J.S. and his parents he would be suspended for three days.\(^\text{435}\) Why was he being suspended? The school said “…that J.S. violated *School District* policy…[with a]…threat to a teacher, harassment of a teacher and principal, and disrespect to a teacher and principal, each resulting in actual harm to the health, safety and

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\(^{425}\) J.S. v. Bethlehem Area Sch. Dist., 807 A.2d 847 (PA 2002.)
\(^{426}\) Id. at 851.
\(^{427}\) Id.
\(^{428}\) Id.
\(^{429}\) Id.
\(^{430}\) Id.
\(^{431}\) Id. at 851-852.
\(^{432}\) Id. at 852.
\(^{433}\) Id.
\(^{434}\) Id.
\(^{435}\) Id.
welfare of the school community.”

The school district conducted a hearing and then suspended J.S. for ten days. Shortly thereafter, it expelled J.S.

J.S. then sued. The Court of Common Pleas affirmed the school’s discipline and the Commonwealth Court upheld their decision. J.S. then appealed to the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. While J.S. argued that the school’s behavior violated his First Amendment rights, the school disagreed, saying that J.S.’s speech was not entitled to First Amendment protection since it constituted a threat. As the court analyzed the facts, it agreed with J.S. that his speech did not constitute a true threat since the school failed to take action for several months after learning about the web site. Thus the court concluded that the Tinker analysis was appropriate. As the court understood Tinker, it believed that it must first determine whether the speech occurred on campus as it appeared to believe that Tinker was inapplicable to off campus student speech. Determining that J.S. had accessed the web site while at school from school computers, the court concluded that the nexus between off campus speech and on campus access was satisfied. Lastly the court had to determine whether J.S.’s speech created a “substantial disruption” as required by Tinker. Given the nature of the statements made on the web site, the court announced that the uproar generated by students, parents, and school staff because of the web site did indeed result in a substantial disruption in the work of the school.

Applying the Tinker analysis, the court announced that the school did not violate J.S.’s First

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436 Id.
437 Id. at 852-853.
438 Id. at 853.
439 Id.
440 Id.
441 Id.
442 Id. at 856.
443 Id. at 860.
444 Id.
445 Id. at 866-868.
446 Id.
447 Id.
448 Id. at 869.
Amendment rights, stating “we find that the School District’s disciplinary actions taken against J.S. did not violate his First Amendment right to freedom of speech.”

As the above facts and holdings demonstrate, courts are interpreting and applying the Tinker analysis in various ways that do not seem to be consistent. Some courts indicate that Tinker applies to both on and off campus student speech while others courts conclude that it applies only to on campus speech. Facts that establish a “substantial disruption” vary from district to district. Sometimes the geographic location of the speech is determinative while at other times courts consider the nexus between the off campus speech and the on campus impact when deciding if Tinker is applicable. If the lack of clarity from the cases is not sufficient, the article next considers the impact of the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights laws and interpretations regarding harassment. It then examines state legislation that mandates school boards provide “safe” schools. Both the Department of Education and several state legislatures not only ask, but require, public schools to enact and enforce certain policies that involve schools with off campus student cyber-speech. Are these regulations and legislation, at both the state and federal levels, constitutional, given the various interpretations of the United States Supreme Court decisions about off campus student cyber-speech?

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449 Id.

III. The Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights

If interpreting and applying the legal analysis required by the *Morse* Quartet is confusing, add more confusion to the analysis when the anti-harassment provisions, monitored by the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights, are thrown into the mixture. Two years ago, the Department drafted a *Dear Colleague Letter* that lauded efforts by school boards to deal with the harmful effects of bullying. However, the letter warned schools not to forget that some behaviors, labeled as bullying, actually constituted peer harassment on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, or disability. Understanding the distinction between what constitutes bullying and what constitutes harassment is crucial because the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights concerns itself with the imposition of liability for peer harassment that is based on race, color, national origin, sex or disability. The Department reminded schools of their legal obligations regarding the enforcement of civil rights statutes by the Department’s Office of Civil Rights. Failure to meet these obligations could result in the imposition of liability. Schools, coping with students’ First Amendment rights and state

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452 Letter known as *Dear Colleague Letter, Bullying*, from Russlynn Ali, Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, OFFICE OF CIVIL RIGHTS to State Education Departments and Local School Districts, visited July 25, 2012, available at [http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.pdf](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.pdf). This letter is occasionally referred to as the *DCL* in other texts.

453 *Id.* at page 1, paragraph #1.
454 *Id.* at page 3, paragraph #5.
455 *Id.*
456 *Id.* at page 1, paragraph #2.
457 *Id.* at page 9, paragraph #4.
legislatures’ anti-bullying statutes, must also deal with the Department’s peer harassment requirements. What happens when there is a conflict? This section explores those topics.

By 2010, the topic of school bullying had become so widespread and public that the Assistant Secretary for the Department’s Office of Civil Rights, Russlyn Ali, spoke to the subject with a Dear Colleague Letter on October 10, 2010. Addressed to state departments of education and local school districts, the letter applauded the anti-bullying efforts made by these organizations, noting:

…[b]ullying fosters a climate of fear and disrespect that can seriously impair the physical and psychological health of its victims and create conditions that negatively affect learning, thereby undermining the ability of students to achieve their full potential.

The letter indicated that some behavior that would fall under a school’s anti-bullying policy might also “…trigger responsibility under one or more of the federal antidiscrimination laws enforced by the Department….” The Department then warned schools to not only address student conduct that fell under its bullying policies but also to consider whether such conduct resulted in “discriminatory harassment.”

According to the letter, labels, used by schools to pigeon hole behavior, were not determinative as to how a school was expected to respond to an incident. The letter advised schools to impartially investigate incidents from a perspective of ascertaining whether the conduct involved harassment that was based on race, color, national origin, sex or disability.

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458 See McCarthy, supra note 302, at 10-12.
460 See Dear Colleague Letter, supra note 452, at 1st page, paragraph #1.
461 Id.
462 Id.
463 Id.
464 Id. at page 3, paragraph #5.
465 Id. at page 2, paragraph #2.
To further explain, the Department indicated that “harassing conduct” could take many forms. It suggested the following examples:

- verbal acts and name calling;
- graphic and written statements, which may include the use of cell phones or the Internet;
- or other conduct that may be physically threatening, harmful or humiliating.\[^{466}\]

The letter stated that “…(h)arassment does not have to include intent to harm, be directed at a specific target or involve repeated incidents.” Instead harassment “…creates a hostile environment when the conduct is sufficiently severe, pervasive or persistent so as to interfere with or limit a student’s ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or opportunities offered by a school.”\[^{467}\] The letter then explained that “when such harassment is based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability, it violates the civil rights laws that OCR enforces.”\[^{468}\]

After defining harassment, the letter told schools that “…[a] school is responsible for addressing harassment incidents about which it knows or reasonably should have known….When responding to harassment, a school must take immediate and appropriate action to investigate or otherwise determine what occurred.”\[^{469}\] If the school determined there had been discriminatory harassment, it was advised to “take prompt and effective steps…..to end the harassment.”\[^{470}\] Punishment of the student offender would not necessarily suffice.\[^{471}\] Instead the school had a responsibility to discover and eradicate

\[^{466}\] Id. at page 2, paragraph #1.
\[^{467}\] Id.
\[^{468}\] Id.
\[^{469}\] Id. at page 2, paragraph #2.
\[^{470}\] Id. at page 2, paragraph # 4.
\[^{471}\] Id. at pages 2-3.
the problem, handle the transgressors, provide training, and put a program in place to see that the harassment did not reoccur.\footnote{472}

Concerned about the implications of the above letter, Francisco M. Negrón, General Counsel for the National School Boards Association, responded on December 7, 2010, writing to Charlie Rose, the Department of Education’s General Counsel.\footnote{473} The letter began by stating the Board’s fear “…that absent clarification, the Department’s expansive reading of the law as stated in the DCL will invited misguided litigation ….”\footnote{474} Referring to the United States Supreme Court’s decision in \textit{Davis v. Monroe Cnty. Bd. of Ed.},\footnote{475} the letter noted that \textit{Davis} imposed liability only upon the demonstration that the school had \textit{actual knowledge} of the harassment while the October 10\textsuperscript{th} Department letter provided for the imposition of liability for harassment about which the school \textit{knew or reasonably should have known}.\footnote{476} Besides the distinction between \textit{actual knowledge} and the standard of \textit{should have known}, the letter further noted that …\textit{Davis} holds that only “harassment that is so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it effectively bars the victim’s access to an educational opportunity or benefit” may result in the imposition of liability for the school district. The DCL, in contrast, states the following: “Harassment creates a hostile environment when the conduct is sufficiently severe, pervasive, or persistent so as to \textbf{interfere with or limit a student’s ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or opportunities offered by the school}.\textsuperscript{477}”

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\footnote{Id.}{472}
\footnote{Id. at page 1, paragraph #1.}{474}
\footnote{526 U.S. 629 (1999.)}{475}
\footnote{See Dear Colleague Letter, supra note 452, at page 2, paragraph #3.}{476}
\footnote{Id. at page 2, paragraph # 5 & page 3, paragraph #1.}{477}
\end{thebibliography}
On page 6, Negrón’s letter noted that the Department’s October 10th letter only minimally acknowledged the limitations of schools to discipline students regarding harassment when students’ First Amendment free speech rights were involved.\textsuperscript{478} Negrón wrote:

…school districts may discipline students within the limitations of First Amendment for on-campus, non-school sponsored speech in the following instances only: if the speech is likely to cause a “substantial disruption of or material interference with school activities” or the speech collides with “the rights of other students to be secure and let alone;” if the speech is “sexually explicit, indecent or lewd,” or it if “can reasonable be regarded as encouraging illegal drug use.” \textsuperscript{479}

Because of the Morse Quartet, Negrón argued that many state legislatures, when enacting cyber-bullying or bullying legislation, attempted to define bullying, cyber-bullying, and harassment in such a way that the terms did not run afoul of the meaning and application of students’ First Amendment rights as delineated by the Morse Quartet. However Negrón argued that the Department’s interpretation, enforcement and imposition of liability upon schools for violating the Department’s Civil Rights laws showed no such understanding. How could a school deal with Snyder’s hate speech\textsuperscript{480} without running afoul of the Department’s Civil Rights laws? It was indeed a dilemma.

\textbf{IV. State Anti-Bullying Statutes}

Between 1995 and 2011, forty-six states enacted legislation to deal with bullying.\textsuperscript{481} A quick look at the state legislation indicates that state legislatures have frequently used “harassment” and “bullying” interchangeably.\textsuperscript{482} Given the specific legal definition of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[478] See Negrón Letter, supra note 473, at page 6, paragraph #3.
\item[479] Id.
\item[480] See Snyder, 131 S.Ct. at 1215.
\item[482] NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARD ASSOCIATION, Id. States whose legislation uses the words “bullying,” “cyber-bullying” or “harassment” include, but are not limited to the following states: Arizona, Florida, Hawaii, Idaho, Mississippi, Nevada, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, Washington and West Virginia.
\end{footnotes}
“harassment” as enforced by the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights, more confusion ensues. Some states apply the legislation to off campus speech while others do not. Some address cyber-speech while others ignore it.

In December of 2011, the Department of Education released a report, *ANALYSIS OF STATE BULLYING LAWS AND POLICIES*. The study states that between 1999 and 2010, there were over one hundred and twenty bills introduced by state legislatures to either require schools or the juvenile justice system to deal with bullying. While some of these laws require discipline by schools when bullying occurs, other states require the intervention of the juvenile justice system. Some legislatures included model bullying policies that schools could adopt in order to show compliance.

According to the report’s executive summary, forty-six states have enacted bullying laws. Forty-five of these states direct schools to create anti-bullying policies; yet three of these states fail to define the behavior that constitutes bullying. Thirty-six states prohibit bullying via electronic media while thirteen of the thirty-six states give schools the authority to discipline off campus behavior if the behavior creates a hostile school environment.

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483 Dear Colleague Letter, *supra* note 452, at page 2, paragraph #1.
484 *NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARD ASSOCIATION, supra* note 481, *Anti-Bullying Table*.
485 Id.
487 Id. at 13.
488 Id. at 25-26.
489 Id.
490 Id. at 16-17.
491 Id. at 17. Hawaii, Michigan, Montana, and South Dakota are now the only states that do not have some form of bullying legislation.
492 Id. at 25. Arizona, Minnesota and Wisconsin enacted anti-bullying legislation but did not define the behavior that constitutes bullying.
493 Id. at 23.
As state legislatures and school agencies as well as local school boards grapple with cyber-bullying, the First Amendment, and the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights definition of “harassment,” there are many publications offering model legislation that will allegedly satisfy everyone and every requirement. 494 According to Stuart-Cassel495 and Dayton,496 state legislatures should ensure that school bullying legislation incorporates the following components:

- a statement of purpose that explains the reason for the legislation;
- a statement of scope that defines the extent or reach of the legislation, i.e. to what behaviors is it applicable and to what behaviors is it not applicable;
- definitions and examples of behaviors that constitute bullying, cyber-bullying, and harassment; these definitions should protect students from the day to day realities of bullying yet not be so overbroad that free speech rights are intruded upon;
- the development and creation of state wide school policies that protect children’s rights, to be free from bullying and to exercise their First Amendment rights; such policies can be shared by school districts throughout the state;
- a requirement that school personnel model appropriate behavior and enforce anti-bullying policies;
- a requirement that schools publicize and communicate the existence of school anti-bullying policies;

494 John Dayton Anne Proffit Dupre, and Ann Elizabeth Blankenship discussed the creation of a model anti-bully statute that would protect students and promote civility and safety in a recent article. See John Dayton, Anne Proffitt Dupre, and Ann Elizabeth Blankenship, Model Anti-Bullying Legislation: Promoting Student Safety, Civility, and Achievement Through Law and Policy Reform, 272 WEST’S ED. L. REPT. 19 (November 24, 2011.)
495 Stuart-Cassell, supra note 486.
496 Dayton, supra note 494.
• a requirement that training be provided for school personnel to model appropriate behavior and counsel students whose behavior violates school policies;
• a mandatory reporting requirement, requiring schools to report violations of school policies;
• a requirement that criminal acts be treated as criminal acts and not as bullying; and
• a requirement that appropriate counseling and disciplinary provisions be provided for students whose conduct violates school bullying policies.\footnote{497}

While the above suggestions for model legislation and model school policies regarding bullying are useful, they are still not sufficiently detailed to answer the questions that courts and school district continue to ask: can off campus student cyber-speech be punished by schools? If so, under what circumstances can off campus speech be punished?\footnote{498} Answering these questions addresses the intersection of students’ First Amendment rights, the Department of Education’s enforcement of civil rights’ laws and state anti-bullying legislation.

\footnote{497 See Stuart-Cassel, supra note 486, at 15-46; See also Dayton, supra note 494, at 25-32.} 

\footnote{498 Presently there are two student speech cases being appealed from federal district courts to federal circuit courts that involved the discipline of off campus student cyber-speech. See Bell v. Itawamba Cnty. Sch. Bd., 2012 WL 877026 (N.D.Miss.), Brief of Appellants, (No. 12-60264) (2012), 2012 WL 3023937 (2012) which is being appealed to the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit. In Bell, Taylor Bell wrote and published, via Facebook and Youtube, a rap song that was critical of his coaches. Taylor was suspended for seven days and then transferred to an alternative school for the remainder of the semester because his rap song was deemed by the school board to constitute both harassment of school employees and threats. Id. at 1-4. See also Wynar v. Douglas Cnty. Sch. Dist., 2011 WL 3512534 (D.Nev.), Brief of Appellees, (No. 11-17127) (2012), 2012 WL 1667907 (2012.) Wynar is being appealed to the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. In this case, Wynar instant messaged a classmate, saying that he wanted to “shoot” named classmates. This IM was forwarded to school administration. The school then suspended Wynar for ten days and then expelled him from school for ninety days. Id. at 1. Also, there is a pending case in the District Court of Minnesota that also involves off campus discipline of a student for cyber-speech. See R.S. v. Minnewaska Area Sch. Dist., Plaintiffs' Memorandum of Law in Response to the District Defendants’ Motion to Dismiss, (No. 12-00588) (2012), 2012 WL 1866708. Here R.S. complained about a hall monitor and communicated about sex with a classmate via Facebook. The classmate’s mother complained to the school principal. To determine the accuracy of these statements, R.S. was detained and her Facebook account searched by school officials. Id.}
Analysis

As *Snyder v. Phelps* 499 so clearly stated: speech, even painful and hurtful speech, is revered and protected in America. 500 Why? It is believed that self government, to a great degree, is determined by the free exchange of ideas even if it does lead to an “uninhibited and robust”501 discussion. The essence of self government is believed to be the ability to speak out on matters of public importance and to discuss unpopular viewpoints. The suppression of speech counteracts this belief. So deeply ingrained in the American psyche is the principle of free speech that America, as a society, was willing to tolerate the free speech rights of Nazis502 to march through a village of Holocaust Jewish survivors in Skokie, Illinois.503 Given the priority that is placed on speech in American life, do K-12 students and their teachers have free speech rights in school where they are learning to participate in the “marketplace of ideas?”504

In 1969, the United States Supreme Court made it plain in *Tinker* that students and teachers did not “shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the school house gate.”505 After *Tinker*, some would argue that later United States Supreme Court decisions on the topic made it less clear to what extent student speech rights existed and when schools could suppress or punish student speech. *Frasier, Hazelwood*, and *Morse* all indicated that while protection of student speech rights was important, it was not absolute. In *Fraser*, Justice Burger wrote that “…. simply because the use of an offensive form of expression may not be prohibited

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499 *See* Snyder, 131 S.Ct. at 1215.
500 Id.
503 *See* Robert D. Richards and Clay Calvert, *Nadine Strossen and Freedom of Expression: A Dialogue with the ACLU’s Top Card Carrying Member*, 13 GEO. MASON U. C.R. L.J. 185, 203 (2003.) The article indicates that the ACLU’s defense of the Nazis to march through Skokie, Illinois, a town then heavily populated with Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, reflected the fact that while many theoretically agreed with “free speech,” the ACLU still lost 15% of its membership for defending the free speech rights of Nazis in Skokie in 1978. According to the article, Strossen concluded that while the principle of free speech was “firmly entrenched” within the United States legal system, it was also poorly understood.
504 *See* Tinker, 393 U.S. at 512.
505 Id. at 506.
to adults making what the speaker considers a political point, [does not mean that] the same latitude must be permitted to children in a public school.” 506 It became obvious, between 1986 when Fraser was decided and later in 2007 when Chief Justice Roberts authored the majority opinion in Morse, 507 that confusion, within the courts as to the correct analysis regarding student speech, still existed. Justice Roberts sought to clarify by writing:

…it is enough to distill from Fraser two basic principles. First, Fraser's holding demonstrates that “the constitutional rights of students in public school are not automatically coextensive with the rights of adults in other settings....” Had Fraser delivered the same speech in a public forum outside the school context, it would have been protected.... In school, however, Fraser's First Amendment rights were circumscribed “in light of the special characteristics of the school environment....” Second, Fraser established that the mode of analysis set forth in Tinker is not absolute. Whatever approach Fraser employed, it certainly did not conduct the “substantial disruption” analysis prescribed by Tinker....

With four United States Supreme Court opinions on K-12 student speech from 1969 through 2007, it would seem that the issue was settled. The analysis should have been clear for lower courts to apply to the facts of cases before them. However, the lower courts have applied the Tinker analysis to cases that involved similar facts; yet these courts have reached dissimilar conclusions.

In Doninger, the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit reiterated the problems facing lower courts. In addition to the confusion surrounding the application of the Morse Quartet analysis to student speech cases, courts and schools are now grappling with the implications of off campus cyber- speech that ends up on campus and is often described by schools as “cyber-bullying.” Doninger eloquently captured the dilemma of lower courts, saying “(t)he law governing restrictions on student speech can be difficult and confusing, even for lawyers, law professors, and judges. The relevant Supreme Court cases can be hard to reconcile,

506 See Frasier, 478 U.S. at 682.
507 See Morse, 551 U.S. at 100.
508 Id. at 404-405.
and courts often struggle to determine which standard applies in any particular case.” Judges are not alone in their confusion. As Naomi Harlin Goodno states in an article that she authored: “(t)here is no Supreme Court case squarely on point….The split in the lower courts’ decisions shows that the law is ambiguous.”

What is a principal to do? He or she is “damned if they do and damned if they don’t” act when confronted with off campus cyber-speech that makes its way onto campus and involves either bullying or harassment. Principals, school boards, and school districts face numerous questions, including:

- whether schools can regulate off campus student speech that is online, i.e. cyber-speech, if it is directed at either school personnel or students, and then arrives on campus? If so, under what circumstances can this speech be regulated?
- whether geography, i.e. on campus or off campus, can be the litmus test for regulation of this speech?
- whether a substantial disruption is established by the arrival, in any form, of off campus speech on the school’s campus? If not, is chaos required to meet the substantial disruption test? What constitutes a substantial disruption?
- whether the individual student’s free speech right that collides with another student’s right to be “let alone” will prevail? What about a student’s right to be free from bullying and harassment?

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509 See Doninger, 642 F.3d at 353.
Unfortunately, there appear to be more questions than answers which is why many are urging the United States Supreme Court to grant certiorari and resolve the issue.

The issues facing the courts, the schools, the state legislatures, the students, and the Department of Education can be summarized as: can a school regulate student speech or expression that occurs outside of school and is not connected to a school sponsored event, yet subsequently makes it way on campus by either the speaker or others? If so, under what circumstances can the speech be regulated? If such speech is beyond the school’s ability to regulate, can schools escape the imposition of liability by the Department of Education and state laws for failure to respond to harassment or bullying? If it is possible to evade liability, how do schools, parents and society want to handle the bullying that sometimes leads to suicide?^{511}

A thorough review of *Tinker* reveals that the Court began its discussion by acknowledging that earlier court decisions^{512} affirmed “the comprehensive authority of the States and of school officials, consistent with fundamental constitutional safeguards, to prescribe and control conduct in the schools…. Our problem lies in the area where students in the exercise of First Amendment rights collide with the rules of the school authorities.”^{513} The language of *Tinker* indicates that the Court considered student speech to have First Amendment protection regardless of whether it took place inside or outside of the classroom. The Court said:

A **student's rights**, therefore, **do not embrace merely the classroom hours.** When he is in the cafeteria, or on the playing field, or on the campus during the authorized hours, he may express his opinions, even on controversial subjects like the conflict in Vietnam, if he does so without ‘materially and substantially

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^{512} Meyer v. Nebraska, 262 U.S. 390 (1923.)

^{513} See Tinker, 393 U.S. at 507.
interfer(ing) with the requirements of appropriate discipline in the operation of the school’ and without colliding with the rights of others…. But conduct by the student, in class or out of it, which for any reason-whether it stems from time, place, or type of behavior-materially disrupts classwork or involves substantial disorder or invasion of the rights of others is, of course, not immunized by the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech.\textsuperscript{514}

The Court cites to the earlier decisions of \textit{Burnside v. Bayers}\textsuperscript{515} and \textit{Blackwell v. Issaquena Cnty. Bd. of Ed.}\textsuperscript{516} to support the above conclusion.

A literal reading of \textit{Tinker} reflects that schools can regulate or discipline student speech that occurs off campus if it has an on campus impact that either causes a substantial disruption with the school’s work, is reasonably foreseeable that it will cause a substantial disruption with the school’s work, or it collides with the rights of others. While some lower courts have debated whether a school’s authority even extends to off campus student speech in any format, \textit{Tinker} does not appear to contemplate that.\textsuperscript{517} From my perspective, \textit{Tinker} is applicable to off campus speech, including cyber-speech, that arrives on campus and either creates a substantial disruption or collides with the rights of others. Given the technological advances of the last twenty years, a geographical litmus test as to when student speech can be disciplined by schools is too limited.

While courts have discussed and analyzed both the “substantial disruption” and the “reasonably foreseeable substantial disruption” \textit{Tinker} tests, courts have paid little attention to \textit{Tinker’s} third prong, the “collides with the rights of others” test. Perhaps this third prong, in conjunction with the “substantial disruption” test could be developed and used to analyze student speech cases that do not fit the parameters of \textit{Fraser, Hazelwood} and \textit{Morse}. Utilization of the

\textsuperscript{514} Id. at 512-513.
\textsuperscript{515} \textit{Burnside v. Bayers}, 363 F.2d 744 (5th Circ. 1966.)
\textsuperscript{516} \textit{Blackwell v. Issaquena County Bd. of Ed.}, 363 F.2d 749 (5th Circ. 1966.)
\textsuperscript{517} \textit{See Morse}, 551 U.S. at 405. Morse explains that “Had Fraser delivered the same speech in a public forum outside the school context, it would have been protected.” This statement adds further confusion to the analysis, in my opinion, as some lower courts have concluded that \textit{Fraser} meant lewd speech, if off campus, could not be regulated under any circumstances. \textit{See} Layshock, 650 F.3d at 216.
“collides with the rights of others” test might resolve some of the behaviors that so bedevil and trouble school administrators. How? This prong could be used to discipline student speech that does not substantially disrupt the school’s work but that can be described as bullying, harassing, libelous, or threatening speech. Speech described as bullying, harassing, libelous or threatening speech, if it is directed at other students or school personnel, is not protected speech and can be disciplined even if it does not create a “substantial disruption.” Why should this approach be allowed? The school’s goal is to teach students civil discourse and debate while protecting their rights to debate contentious issues. Yet the schools must also provide a safe environment in which students can thrive and learn without being subjected to harassment, bullying, libel or threats. Schools want to protect student political speech rights yet also allow schools the flexibility to cope with the cruelty, racism, sexism, libel, or threats that other types of student speech creates.

With the above approach, the analysis of student school speech, whether on or off campus, then becomes the following.

- Is the speech lewd, involves a captive audience and is used on campus? If so, apply *Fraser*. 518

- If not, is it speech that carries the imprimatur of the school and involves pedagogy? If so, apply *Hazelwood*. 519

- If not, is the speech off campus speech at a school sponsored event that appears to promote illegal drug use? If so, apply *Morse*. 520

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518 Fraser, 478 U.S. at 675.
519 Hazelwood, 484 U.S. at 260.
520 Morse, 551 U.S. at 393.
• If neither Fraser, Hazelwood, or Morse is applicable, apply Tinker’s “substantial disruption” test. If the speech arrive on campus and disrupt school classes or administration? If so, the speech can be disciplined. An exception to the “substantial disruption” test might mean that pure political speech can be protected even if it does cause a “substantial disruption.” What is a substantial disruption? Courts are still debating this. In Doninger, the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit found a “substantial disruption” occurred when the school administration was forced to have numerous meetings and handle many irate parental emails and phone calls because of Avery Donginer’s blog post. Yet the United States Court of Appeals for the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, in Layshock, held that the student discussion and administrative uproar caused by Jason Layshock’s parody posting about the school’s principal did not constitute a substantial and material disruption. If the Court would define substantial disruption, it would greatly assist the analysis of student speech cases. The definition should not be too restrictive, i.e. one person’s bad day should not constitute a substantial disruption, yet neither chaos nor turmoil should be required to establish substantial disruption. A description or list of behaviors that demonstrate substantial disruption would help resolve the issue. From my perspective, student speech that requires school personnel to spend 75% of their week dealing with the problems generated by the speech could be considered a substantial disruption. School personnel responding to telephone calls, emails, student and parent visits, counseling sessions, disciplinary sessions, hearings, and classroom time are examples of a “substantial disruption.”

521 Tinker, 393 U.S. at 503.
522 Doninger, 642 F.3d at 344.
523 Layshock, 650 F.3d at 219.
If the speech does not cause a substantial disruption, it could be regulated under Tinker’s third prong, the “collides with the rights of others” test if the speech is directed at other students or school personnel and can be described as speech that is bullying, harassing, libelous or threatening.

The above analysis would balance competing rights while allowing schools to operate without chaos and disruption while preserving the political speech of students and providing a safe school environment that neither permits, condones, or ignores student bullying or harassment.

How should courts then handle Tinker’s “reasonably foreseeable disruption” test? While the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit held that it was reasonably foreseeable that a violent IM icon in Wisniewski would cause a substantial disruption,\(^{524}\) district courts in Indiana\(^{525}\) and California\(^{526}\) concluded that raunchy student photos and bullying YouTube videos did not substantially disrupt nor was it foreseeable that the student behavior involved would likely disrupt school operations. Perhaps the “reasonably foreseeable” test could be retired. If the “substantial disruption” and “collides with the rights of others” tests are used, the “reasonably foreseeable” test becomes irrelevant. Avery Doninger’s blast email and blog created a substantial disruption because parents and students behaved as she requested, contacting the school and bombarding the school with messages on the topic of Jamfest. School personnel spent days dealing with phone calls, emails, and parental concerns that resulted from the Jamfest post. Too much staff time was wasted on an issue that can be judged to be relatively unimportant. The “substantial disruption” test is necessary because Doninger’s speech did not fit

\(^{524}\) See Wisniewski, 494 F.3d at 36.  
\(^{525}\) See T.V., 507 F. Supp.2d at 784-785.  
\(^{526}\) See J.C., 711 F. Supp.2d at 1100.
in the category of a threat or libel nor did it constitute harassment or bullying which would be necessary to apply in a “collides with the rights of others” test.

Using the “collides with the rights of others” test means the court’s holding in Wisniewski is correct as it involved a threat which would permit Wisniewski’s speech to be disciplined. T.V.’s holding is also then correct under this analysis. In T.V., the raunchy pictures did not involve harassment, bullying, libel or threats. They also did not create a substantial disruption at school as two or three parents complained to the school. This is not speech with which the school should be involved. This speech, while raunchy, should be protected. Parents who objected to it should interact directly with T.V.’s parents rather than requesting that the school act as the intermediary. In T.V., there is not a sufficient nexus between the student’s speech, the aggrieved students and parents, and the school. This speech involved off campus behavior that should have been handled by and among parents rather than involving the school. Thus the United States District Court for the Northern District of Indiana reached the correct decision in T.V. as did the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in Wisniewski.

Yet while the United States District Court for the Central District of California applied the correct analysis to the facts in J.C., it reached the wrong conclusion. J.C.’s behavior toward C.C. constituted harassment, bullying and possibly libel. Had the court used the “collides with the rights of others” test rather than the “substantial disruption” test, it would have been

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527 While some of the courts discussed “real” threats as opposed to “perceived” threats, this distinction is not helpful. Given the ability of individuals to heavily arm themselves and then massacre those with whom they disagree, it seems unfair to place school administrators in the position of trying to sort through what constitutes a real threat as opposed to a joke. See Cuff ex rel. B.C. v. Valley Central Sch. Dist., 677 F.3d 109, 111 (2nd Cir. 2012.)

528 T.V., 807 F. Supp2d at 790.

529 Wisniewski, 494 F.3d at 38-39.

530 J.C., 711 F. Supp.2d at 1117-1118.
easy for the school to discipline J.C. without worrying about whether J.C.’s behavior resulted in a substantial disruption of work at school.

Using the above analysis, i.e. the student’s speech either creates a substantial disruption at school or “collides with the rights of others,” I would argue that the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit reached the correct decision in Kowalski, using the wrong analysis. Kara Kowalski used the Internet to mock, taunt, bully and harass a fellow classmate, Shay N. While Kara’s off campus speech may not have created a substantial disruption in terms of additional work created for school administrators, it was conduct that could certainly be described as bullying or harassing another classmate. Again, using the above analysis, the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, in their en banc opinions in Layshock and Snyder, reached incorrect decisions and used the wrong analysis. Since both of those decisions involved off campus student cyber-speech that could be described as libelous or harassing of school personnel, one could conclude, using the “collides with the rights of others” test, that Tinker was satisfied and that both Layshock and Snyder could be disciplined for their speech.

As Tinker is now being construed, it is difficult for courts to apply the appropriate analysis to the particular facts of a case before them. Melinda Cupps Dickler’s excellent article suggests that despite the confusion of the student speech cases that the justices agree on the following principles:

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531 Kowalski, 652 F.3d at 567-570.
532 Id. at 572.
533 Layshock, 650 F.3d at 205.
534 Snyder, 650 F.3d at 915.
535 Layshock, 650 F.3d at 219. See also Snyder, 650 F. 3d at 930.
536 See Dickler, supra note 2, at 380.
• students retain significant First Amendment protection while in school;
• however, students’ rights are limited and are not as extensive as those of adults;
• school officials are permitted substantial discretion to maintain discipline even if that results, not intentionally but as a consequence, in the restriction of speech;
• political speech is strongly protected from viewpoint discrimination;
• Tinker’s substantial disruption test is still applicable to any student speech that isn’t regulated by Fraser, Hazelwood, or Morse;\(^{537}\)

Conclusion

Schools, state legislatures, courts, students, parents, and the Department of Education continue to grapple with balancing the speech rights of students with the rights of students to be “let alone.” Since the United States Supreme Court denied certiorari in three cases this past term, it seems clear that they consider the matter settled. However a reading of decisions from the various district and circuit courts in the last decade indicates confusion still exists. Lower courts are applying, misapplying, or misunderstanding the holdings from the Court’s decisions in this area. Different results, often with similar factual situations, continue. A citation analysis of Kowalski, indicates that cases in the secondary student cyber-speech arena continue through the court’s pipelines.\(^{538}\) Given the importance of bully prevention, the liability issues involved, and the confusion surrounding what is deemed to be the appropriate reaction of school officials to off campus student cyber-speech that comes on campus, it would be very helpful in the Court addressed this subject and provided a clear analysis soon.

\(^{537}\) Id.
\(^{538}\) See Bell, 2012 WL at 877026 and Wynar, 2011 WL at 3512534. See also R.S., 2012 WL at 1866708.