

6th Grade

2nd Place

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Teacher: Karen Meyer

Q: Suppose a student creates a Facebook group to insult a teacher. Should a Principal be allowed to suspend a student for disrespecting a teacher online?

“Dimwitted Pelosi has taken her arrogance to a new level”, “Kanye West is a ‘donkey’s behind’ for outburst...”, “...Obama sure likes the sound of ‘T’ “, “to those that believe unions are the root of corporate evil, I give you General Motors...”. Each of these headlines was said by a prominent adult. Should they be reprimanded or are they exercising Freedom of Speech under the First Amendment of our Constitution? Does freedom of speech have a legal age limit? No. Don’t minors have the right to express their opinions? To this, I say yes. Unless there is a threat of physical danger or harm where not only a principal but the legal authorities should get involved, I passionately believe a principal should not have the right to suspend a student for disrespecting a teacher online.

In the landmark Supreme Court case, *Tinker v. Des Moines School District*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969) the Tinker siblings chose to express their objection to the Vietnam War by wearing black armbands to school. The school board prohibited this visible display of protest. The brother and sister were suspended because they did not adhere to the school’s rule. Eventually, the family filed a suit in district court alleging the children’s First Amendment rights were violated. Although they lost in district court and also in the Court of Appeals, the Tinkers finally won in the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruled that the children had freedom of expression based on their Constitutional rights. Justice Fortas, speaking for the majority, stated, “...In the absence of a specific showing of constitutionally valid reasons to regulate their speech, students are entitled to freedom of expression of their views....” Students have as much right to express their opinion about a teacher on the internet as the Tinkers had by wearing their armbands to express their position on the war.

Liberty affords us the freedom to have beliefs, ideas and opinions. It gives us the right to gather in groups and express our opinions in public. The Internet is a modern day public forum that people use to state their opinions. Despite the argument that the Internet allows a person to share an opinion with hundreds or thousands of people instantaneously, the First Amendment should still be upheld. As there is no legal age to Freedom of Speech, there is also no limitation on the size of audience that can hear someone’s message.

If the teacher believes there is a case of libel or slander, she has the right to take this to court. The principal, however, does not have the right to suspend the student. While disrespecting authority is not appropriate, historical rulings like *Tinker vs. Des Moines*, the First Amendment to the Constitution, and the pursuit of Liberty all grant freedom of expression. This freedom is not constrained by age or size of audience. This is why I strongly believe a principal should not be able to suspend a student if they insult a teacher online. To violate our First Amendment rights is not only a crime it ruins a core democratic value.