

# The Gazette

QUAKERTOWN, Pa.

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# Andrejko issues edict to keep student achievements out of one newspaper <sup>3</sup>

By **RANDY KRAFT**

THE GAZETTE

**Q**uakertown Community School District does not have to offer the same fair treatment to all newspapers that cover the district, according to Superintendent Lisa Andrejko.

With the exception of obeying requirements of state and federal laws, Andrejko said the district provides information requested by newspapers as a courtesy at her discretion.

Several school board members supported Andrejko's position during the board's June 25 public meeting.

But board member Manuel Alfonso called it un-American.

The subject of their discussion was The Gazette, the newspaper you are reading. And the discussion dominated the meeting, whose routine business was trumped by anger and hostility toward the newspaper.

Alfonso told the board he had received a complaint that the district's administration refused to provide the following information to the paper: high school graduation photos, honor roll lists and contacts for sports coaches.

Saying "I am very sorry to bring this topic to the board," Alfonso reported

he had tried to reach an agreement with Andrejko to resolve the matter that afternoon "but we did not find common ground."

"Considering that this is a government body financed by public funds, I believe these actions are inappropriate and possibly illegal," said Alfonso. "Newspapers should be able to operate without government interference or prior censorship. A government body cannot discriminate against any publication."

Alfonso said the district is infringing on freedom of the press by obstructing and restricting information.

"I urge the board to instruct the superintendent to release the data and information to The Gazette and continue providing it in the future," he said.

But the board took no action to do so; nor did Alfonso or any other board member attempt to make a formal motion to so instruct the superintendent.

Board member Kelly Van Valkenburgh asked if the federal Freedom of Information Act or Pennsylvania's right-to-know law requires the district to provide the information being sought.

"No," said Andrejko. "It's a courtesy." Said Van Valkenburgh: "I want our

❖  
See commentary on page 15:  
"Revenge Of The Superintendent"  
hurts students, community.

❖  
district to stick to the letter of law and not be out of compliance with the law, but I don't believe we need to move beyond that."

"We are under no obligation to release student data — ever," Andrejko told the board. "It's our discretion to release any information about students. It's our discretion to release any information to the paper that we want that's not covered under the Freedom of Information Act."

Andrejko said the district pays to have students' photos taken "so why would I ever release that for free? I would never do that."

A review of archives in the newspaper's downtown Quakertown office indicates the student photos had appeared in the Free Press every year for the past five years.

Andrejko repeatedly said she was asked for the information the first time by Alfonso the afternoon of the meeting.

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# District halts news of students

From page three.

"I have received no communication whatsoever from the Gazette," she said. "No e-mail, nothing."

But Alfonso said the administration knows the newspaper has been trying to get at least some of the information for weeks. "This is not new." He said when The Gazette requested photos of the seniors, it was given a blank disk. So it unsuccessfully requested the material a second time.

Andrejko said that disk was provided to the newspaper by the person who does the high school's yearbook "without our permission."

"Dr. Andrejko said she instructed her subordinates not to provide this information," said Alfonso.

"That's correct," said Andrejko.

"You say it is discretionary, I say it is un-American ... to put this kind of pressure on the newspapers to be friendly and not to criticize," said Alfonso.

"Okay, it is a public image issue, it is not a legal issue, but there is no reason to deny any newspaper data that is paid by the public's money. [The school district] is not a private company. I believe very strongly that we are not doing justice to The Gazette and possibly in the future to other newspapers."

While the state's right-to-know law does permit public agencies such as school districts to withhold certain information about minors, "our position would be that once a school district has released honor roll lists, for example, then it is a matter of public record," said Teri Henning, general counsel at the Pennsylvania Newspaper Association.

She also said business phone numbers of district coaches are a matter of public record, but home phone numbers are not.

Henning declined to address the broader issue of whether a school district has an ethical obligation to equally treat all newspapers

## "AT OUR DISCRETION"

Board member Paul Stepanoff said when the district gives newspapers lists of honor roll students "that is not data required to be given to papers under right-to-know, but yet we provide it anyway."

Andrejko said it is provided by the district "to whomever we want to at our discretion."

Said Stepanoff: "We could be in the position where we would supply that information to one newspaper and not another newspaper?"

Said Andrejko: "Sure. I don't have a problem with that."

Said Stepanoff: "I would have a problem with that type of data being denied one publication and not another."

With reporters from four newspapers sitting at the press table in the board meeting, Stepanoff questioned whether, if one of the other newspapers covering the district writes something negative, that paper also may be denied honor roll lists the next time.

"I could do that, absolutely," said Andrejko. "I'm under no obligation to give you the honor roll."

Stepanoff replied: "It seems we need a better policy than just discretion."

But other board members disagreed and indicated their problems with the Gazette involve far more than just one negative article.

Andrejko said cooperating with reporters also is at the district's discretion, but added QCSO has been "quite accommodating" in cooperating with a Gazette reporter covering the district.

Mosley claimed the request for information did not come from management of The Gazette, but from opinion columnist Richard Woldow. Alfonso said Woldow was passing on a complaint from The Gazette's management.

"Who is the management?" asked Mosley, adding Woldow is "just an

Gazette." She said Woldow is not listed as a member of the newspaper's editorial board. She said if the paper's editorial board had raised the concern, "perhaps we should be spending time on it. But for just this opinion columnist? I don't think we should be spending any time on it. As long as we comply with right-to-know, I'm comfortable with that."

"We absolutely would comply with right-to-know," said Andrejko.

## E-MAIL SPURS DEBATE

Woldow communicated the newspaper's problems getting information in an e-mail to board vice president Dean Wackerman, who was not at the June 25 meeting. He also sent copies of that e-mail to board members Alfonso, Stepanoff and George Dager.

In it, he explained The Gazette sought graduation pictures of Quakertown High School seniors for its graduation issue, which the former Free Press had published every year. After receiving a blank disk, he said the newspaper tried to reach Quakertown High principal Anita Serge to obtain the pictures a second time, but Serge never called back.

"This is just the latest in a series of actions which have had the effect of keeping student news out of The Gazette," wrote Woldow. "In the end, the losers every time are the kids."

In his e-mail, Woldow said the administration also refused to provide the newspaper with contacts for sports coaches and honor roll lists.

He also said the district posted on its Web site that The Gazette refused to publish 'Paw Prints,' the high school newspaper, as its predecessor the Free Press had done. Woldow said that is totally untrue, explaining Gazette owner and publisher Mark Barry e-mailed Andrejko several times and offered any help necessary to continue that publication. "He never received any response."

**VICTIMS OF UNTRUTHS?**

have a problem with Andrejko's position because when she looked at The Gazette for the first time "over 90 percent of the paper was negative toward this district." She accused the paper of "many occurrences of misinformation and inaccurate information."

Woldow's columns have criticized the district's administration and school board.

Several board members maintain that they, and even members of their families, unfairly and inaccurately have been targeted by the columnist.

"We all know what we've gone through," said board member Nancy Tirjan.

After the meeting, board president Linda Martin said she supports Andrejko's position regarding The Gazette. Martin said a newspaper's management is responsible for what appears on its pages.

She said Woldow has written "untruths" in his column about herself and at least three other current board members, plus past board members.

Martin said people don't even want to run for school board because they don't want to go through what Woldow put her and her family through.

"The Gazette and the prior Free Press have hurt my family. They were cruel. It was Mr. Woldow and his opinion column. So having some ill feelings against The Gazette and Free Press is justified. An editor at The Free Press had control but allowed that stuff to continue."

Martin said she stopped reading the Free Press years ago, and does not read The Gazette, so she doesn't get upset by "the lies and twists" put into opinion columns. She said she is an honest and reputable person. "I have to answer to my God and do the right thing at all times."

Martin did not cite any specific examples of "un-

Martin and others in the district "would like nothing more than to muzzle dissent and those who reveal the truth."

Woldow said if anyone in the school district is going to accuse him of writing things that are not true, they should cite specific examples and be prepared to defend them.

"For years I have heard 'Woldow lies' and 'Woldow distorts,'" said the columnist. "I, or the editor, have told the complainer: 'Tell us exactly what you are referring to, tell us what are the lies, and we will make the corrections if we were wrong'. No one has ever done so."

Neither Woldow nor Barry, the publisher of The Gazette, were present at the June 25 board meeting.

In an e-mail, Barry commented on Andrejko's position regarding his newspaper: "I'm sure that Dr. Andrejko does an adequate job in the eyes of the school board majority, but this action does not serve the community well. It prevents the only newspaper published in Quakertown from recognizing the achievements of school children and, ultimately, it is the children which Dr. Andrejko is hurting through her policy."



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