



121 E. Capitol Ave., Little Rock, AR

Arkansas Legislative Council

Co-chair Sen. Bill Sample, [Bill.Sample@senate.ar.gov](mailto:Bill.Sample@senate.ar.gov)

Co-chair Rep. Jim Dotson, [jim.dotson@arkansashouse.org](mailto:jim.dotson@arkansashouse.org)

Vice-chair Rep. Jon S. Eubanks, [Jon.Eubanks@arkansashouse.org](mailto:Jon.Eubanks@arkansashouse.org)

Vice-chair Sen. Terry Rice, [Terry.Rice@senate.ar.gov](mailto:Terry.Rice@senate.ar.gov)

To the members of the Arkansas Legislative Council,

As members of the Arkansas Pro Chapter of the United States' oldest journalism organization, the Society of Professional Journalists ([www.spj.org](http://www.spj.org)), we write to express our grave concern that the Arkansas Department of Education's proposed revision of public school accrediting standards will reduce the value of an Arkansas high school diploma in competition with other states' graduates.

Specifically, we are concerned that the minimum high school accrediting standards will no longer require such courses as journalism, physics or world history and that these would be replaced with more general topics such as English language arts, science and social studies. As you might surmise, the continued offering of journalism courses as an elective is of deepest concern to us.

We support the position of the Arkansas Press Association, which wrote to the ALC's Rules and Regulations subcommittee "that if schools are not required to offer journalism classes as an elective, then many districts simply won't, depriving high school students of the opportunity to learn objective thinking, community involvement, civic issues, fact-finding and news photography."

The APA highlighted research that shows journalism students generally do better in school, in many ways, than nonjournalism students. The APA pointed to a study by Jack Dvorak and others in the 1990s, the findings of which are summarized at <http://www.cisd.org/cms/lib6/TX01917765/Centricity/Domain/529/journalism-students-do-better-1.pdf>.

Journalism coursework, as well as the extracurricular benefit of a high school newspaper or other outlet for journalistic work, is proven to help young minds develop the skills necessary to

succeed in today's rapidly evolving world – just as music courses help in developing mathematical skills. Student journalists practice crucial skills rooted in researching and fact-checking, along with practicing objectivity. In a time of “fake news” and increased skepticism toward the media due to concerns of bias, it is imperative that Arkansas schools train students to both sift through and verify information.

Student journalists also learn about emerging technologies, become better communicators through interviewing and storytelling, and strengthen their math and critical-thinking skills through working with data. By giving students the opportunity to put this knowledge to use, Arkansas high schools play a role in creating graduates who are well-rounded and possess the skills needed to thrive in higher education and the workforce.

The Arkansas Pro Chapter of SPJ appreciates that less specificity in required courses and more latitude and choice can benefit smaller, less financially secure school districts, but we worry that a lack of standardized and specific minimum statewide course requirements will tilt the educational playing field in favor of rich districts and further weaken poor districts.

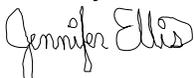
In that vein, we also take issue with a statement made by a school counselor in the Education Department's submitted record of public comments on the proposed accrediting standards. The counselor wrote in favor of removing drama and journalism from the required 38 credits, saying those courses attract very few students and take up space in the school's master course schedule.

The counselor's view seems short-sighted and prejudicial: Small numbers of students might sign up for physics or calculus or advanced math, but those courses are no less vital to some students' intended careers or further education. Also, could it be that schools' failure to promote certain courses ensures that few students will sign up for them?

In broad terms, we think the loosening of accrediting standards ultimately will hurt Arkansas students in the increasingly competitive world of information we all inhabit.

We urge you to send the revised standards back to the Education Department for further review, discussion and revision.

Sincerely,



Arkansas Pro Chapter,  
Society of Professional Journalists

President Jennifer Ellis, [jellis@arkansasonline.com](mailto:jellis@arkansasonline.com)  
Vice President Chelsea Boozer, [cboozer@arkansasonline.com](mailto:cboozer@arkansasonline.com)  
Treasurer Bobby Ampezzan, [bobby@arkansaspublicmedia.org](mailto:bobby@arkansaspublicmedia.org)  
Secretary Syd Hayman, [sydhayman@gmail.com](mailto:sydhayman@gmail.com)