Whose right is it, anyway?

There’s an adage about journalists: Don’t pick a fight with someone who buys ink by the barrel.

Two of the nation’s largest school districts—Los Angeles and Philadelphia—learned this lesson the hard way after proposing or issuing policies to control media access to board members and school employees. Both districts were slapped with swift rebukes in January from free-speech advocates and media organizations, and the policies were postponed or withdrawn entirely.

Los Angeles school board member Marlene Canter proposed a “code of conduct” that would have required her colleagues to recognize that the board president is the “official voice of the board.” The proposal would require dissenting members to say that they are making personal statements that do not represent the board’s view as a whole. The code also would require that board members leave school management roles to the superintendent and notify each other before visiting a school, office, or event within another board member’s district. The proposal also called for “progressive” sanctions against members who violate the policy.

Canter’s proposal was postponed without a vote after board members and news organizations criticized it as too restrictive and an attempt to silence the minority on the board. Canter said she might bring a revised version to the board in a few months.

“This is in no way meant to curtail anybody from doing anything,” she told the Los Angeles Daily News. “They are standards and expectations.”

Critics of the plan said that voters who elect the board suffer if they do not know the views of all of their members.

“The point is the public has a right to know ... I understand the need for boards or councils to get their own views out, but absolutely controlling what goes out does not represent the public,” said Lisa Walker, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Education Writers Association.

In Philadelphia, chief executive Paul Vallas quickly rescinded a policy that would have required all school employees to notify and get approval from the district’s communications office before talking to the media. Cecilia Cummings, the district’s communications director, issued the policy—without Vallas seeing it first—in an effort to stem the flow of inaccurate information and a barrage of media inquiries surrounding Philadelphia’s overhaul plan.

“That goes against my philosophy,” Vallas told the Philadelphia Inquirer. “My philosophy is free flow of information. You can’t restrict information. It’s just not what we’re about.”

Walker told ASBJ the policy was “shortsighted.”

Rich Bagin, executive director of the National School Public Relations Association, agreed that the media must have access to schools and school employees. In the best circumstances, he said, a communications person provides background information and helps reporters gain access “in a way that doesn’t interrupt the operation of the school.”

“A gag order is not the right way to go,” Bagin told ASBJ. “Gag orders just do not work.”—Glenn Cook, Managing Editor