

Schools, The Media ...and You

**A Guide for Principals,
Administrators and
the Board of Education**

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Introduction

Principals and their staffs do more for a school system's public relations than any single public information officer can do from a central office. Common sense tells us that.

Go into a restaurant and listen to a group of teachers. Do they like their job? Are they complaining about the principal? The students? The parents? If so, is this good p.r.?

Again, common sense should tell you the answer.

What about your custodians? Your bus drivers? Your teacher assistants?

How many times have you received a complaint based on third-hand, misguided information that has little or no basis in fact?

Guess what, folks, the media is picking up on those complaints. And, more often than not, they will run with them. And sometimes, they will run with them with little regard for the facts.

The best ways to combat this problem are to be **UP FRONT** and **FACTUAL**. If you can't tell someone something that's confidential, tell them you can't tell them. But assure them that they will know as soon as the time is right.

So the task we have is multi-faceted. Students, parents, business partners, the community at large and the media are all part of the public relations plan. Get one going against you, and it often has a domino effect. Get one going for you, and the dominos roll — though more slowly — up hill.



What is included in these next few pages is basic, common sense stuff for dealing with the media. Some of these you have heard or read before, but they bear repeating because many of the same problems keep cropping up.

Some simple rules:

- Superintendents and board members don't like surprises. Keep the Superintendent and his staff informed at all times. It's also worth noting that the Public Information Officer does not like surprises, either, for what that is worth.

- Focus on solutions, not rehashing the problem over and over.

- Respect deadlines, especially when dealing with the media.

- Be up front about your problems, and typically they will move down on the page.

- Be upbeat about your successes, and typically they will move up on the page.

And now, onto the rest of the manual...

Education Basics: The 3 Rs

Reporters,
Rights,
Rules

Reporters

Reporters, despite what you may think, are human, too.

They make mistakes, some more than their share. They can allow personal experience or feelings to cloud their questioning. They also can be the best and most reliable compatriot you have ever had.

Reporters distinguish themselves by being first and/or providing more information than their competitors. That is their job. If you are contacted, your job is to make sure the reporter is able to do his job without hurting you.

Sounds tough, doesn't it? It's not as hard as you think.

Just as you have a chain of command, so does the media. Respect their job, try to be accommodating and be up front with the reporter. Don't be afraid to spend time discussing the facts of a story, but don't go away from your message.

If you do these things, as a general rule, the media will respect your position as well.

What is news?

Often negative, news is information that is not the norm. It involves conflict, is irregular or unusual, is special or different. If it's just a normal everyday thing, then usually it's not news.

Don't forget — news also can be what reporters say it is.

Reporter's Rights

A reporter has the right to:

- Reasonable access to legitimate news sources.
- Have his/her deadlines and logistical needs considered.
- Ask any question on any topic.
- Receive a concise and direct answer to relevant and appropriate questions.
- Seek timely responses to inquiries and to follow-up for clarification.
- Request printed or pictorial material to support an interview.
- Receive correct information if misinformation is given.
- Check quotes or seek additional information prior to publication.
- Redirect the interview to other topics and to evaluate and report the story from his/her perspective.
- Access — The right to gather information, photos and video from any public — right away.

Your Rights

You have the right to:

- Find out what the story/topic is prior to the interview.
- Know how the interview material is to be used, and if other people will be interviewed for the story.
- Pause, to think of a knowledgeable answer to a question.
- Interpret and restate obscure or lengthy questions.
- Clarify information.
- Steer the topic, and to bring up key points relevant to the story.
- Find someone who is willing to conduct the interview.

NOTE:

You do not have the right to view or read a story prior to publication.

Rules to Remember

#6: Give the media what they need, not necessarily what they want.

When a crisis occurs on your campus, you will be descended upon. If it is a hot button issue, the media will call a whole bunch of people to get opinions. Have a clear idea of what can and cannot be released; if you're not sure, tell the reporter that you will call them back and get some clarification. Often reporters will just ask for a quick comment. But that is exactly what they want — commentary, not facts. Stick to the facts that can be released.

#5: Respect deadlines. Respect deadlines. Respect DEADLINES.

Be aware of deadlines, especially with television stations. If you are not ready to talk when the reporter calls, ask what the deadline is and if you can call the person back. Realize that the media needs production/writing time. Remember, silly mistakes usually occur for one of two reasons: 1) The reporter is not knowledgeable about the topic that is being written about; 2) The reporter does not have enough time to appropriately check for the facts.

#4: If it's not you, it needs to be someone else.

If you cannot be interviewed, for whatever reason, help find someone who can act as the spokesperson. Seek out others who you feel will be able to tell your story as well as you. On a tragedy or controversial topic that has "legs" — i.e. stories that evolve over several days — the media will start looking for a variety of faces. If you don't provide the variety to them, they'll find it somewhere else.

#3: "No comment" is a no-no; be non-defensive, pro-active and outwardly friendly — regardless.

Refrain from saying "No comment." This makes you look like you've got something to hide. If you don't know the answer, tell the reporter you will find out or find someone who can answer their questions. Remember, don't speculate.

#2: Accentuate the positive. You can't eliminate the negative.

Don't deny, ignore or avoid something when the facts show otherwise. Show the reporter — illustrate if necessary — how you are being proactive in your response to this problem. Explain how you are working to prevent this from happening again. Ask the reporter to return in six months to see how you have responded.

#1: DON'T LIE.

The most important rule is to be honest. Don't lie to a reporter. Don't necessarily give up the farm, but don't lie. You **WILL** get caught, maybe not now but eventually, and the media suffers from an extreme case of elephantitis when someone lies to them.

If you do not feel comfortable talking about a specific topic, tell the reporter you or someone else will call them back with the information (remember: what they need, not necessarily the information they will want). Get some clarification on what you can/cannot say and call the reporter back, or get someone else to call for you.

The message...

What are we
trying to say?

What is the best way
to say it?

LIFE READY

Yep, that's the goal. We want our children to be ready for life beyond high school. It is our job as educators to help them move in that direction.

Everything we say and do should revolve around this ultimate goal. It is our job to help our children become life ready. If we don't succeed, what will the goal be then?

How are we helping our children to become life ready? By focusing on the following goals:

- 1) Shared expectations for high performance and student success.
- 2) Safe and orderly schools.
- 3) Recruiting, compensating and retaining quality teachers, administrators and staff.
- 4) Efficient and effective operation and communication.
- 5) Building strong partnerships through effective communication with family and community.
- 6) Character education.

Crisis Communications requires...

common sense and lightning speed

The audience is a bottom line group.

They want to know,

“Am I safe?”

Your answer: Reassure them that they are, but be realistic.

Don't blow something out of of proportion.

The key to successful, accurate news coverage is:

SPEAK IN PLAIN ENGLISH

This one sounds simple, but it's not as easy as it looks for some educators.

Whether it is dealing with a reporter or with the average parent, speaking in plain English is something that will pay off.

Far too much attention is given to acronyms that condense words that many “plain folk” won't understand. Testing data, while important to us as educators and ultimately our students and parents, is in many cases so complex that it goes over the head of most people.

Again, remember that your audience is a bottom line group. In cases when safety is not the primary concern, what they want to know is:

- How it will affect me and my child.
- How it affects us as taxpayers.
- How it reflects on the school and/or the school system.

The ABCs of Educational Acronyms...

Here is what you shouldn't say... to the media or anyone else

I'm an ILT on a PDP who wants to be on an IGP. How can I do this when the SBE and DPI have us teaching the ABCs, especially when we have many kids on IEPs because they are ADD, ADHD, BEH, EMH or otherwise EC. And what if I'm part of VIF? Do I help LEPs or is that the responsibility of someone else in the LEA?

Please don't think of me as an SOB or put me on a PIP for bringing this up. I don't want to be DOA.

This PSA provided by your local PIO,
GC

The Interview

How to relax

Interviewing techniques

Strategies for
answering questions

How to Relax

(Remember: The extraction will only take a few minutes, and I have a new set of pliers)

These tips will help you to relax before and during an interview:

- Be energetic.
- Stand up straight.
- Gesture (helps to relieve tension).
- Stretch before an interview (helps to relieve tension).
- Take deep breaths.
- Focus on the subject.
- Talk in short sentences, regardless of type of media.

Interviewing Techniques

#1: Don't memorize your message, but know what you want to say.

Your goal is to deliver your information conversationally, not memorize it. Think of your messages as a "concept" to be conveyed rather than inflexible statements. Use words that naturally come to you.

#2: Before you start an interview, avoid distractions and get focused.

Try to concentrate only on what you are about to say. Avoid last-minute distractions and conversations before starting an interview. If that is impossible, then take a moment to gather your thoughts before speaking.

#3: Be up front – at the front.

Say what you want to say at the start of the interview. This way, your message won't have to be weaved (and in some cases, jammed) into the conversation later. Ask the reporter if you can say "a few things" about the topic before the interview begins. Then, if the reporter has questions, they can ask them after you've gotten your message out.

#4: Repeat the primary message.

Before the interview ends, make sure you find some way to restate your primary message a second time.

#5: Keep the "Spirit."

If the interview is extended or concerns very technical topics (test results, budget questions), try to deliver the spirit of your message. Always be consistent with the "spirit" if not the "letter" of your messages.

#6: Address – not finesse.

Maintain the philosophy of your messages while trying to be forthcoming so the public and the reporter believe you addressed rather than finessed the issues. For this to work, it is important to contemplate answering all worst-case questions. This is time-consuming with a risk of getting off message or saying too much, but it can be persuasive.

Strategies for Answering Questions In Interviews

Situation: What if I have no information at all?

Strategy: Say you don't have it, will provide it as soon as you can.

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Situation: How long should my answers be?

Strategy: As concise as possible without sounding rude, abrupt, or insensitive.

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Situation: What if a reporter interrupts your answer?

Strategy: In a friendly manner, ask if you may finish your comment, and then finish it.

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Situation: What if you don't understand the question?

Strategy: Ask for it to be repeated until you understand it.

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Situation: What if a reporter is nasty?

Strategy: Always remain friendly and remember your real audience is the public, not the reporters. Strive to be "the quiet voice of reason."

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Situation: What if you can't answer?

Strategy: Say why you can't and steer to a message.

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Situation: What if a reporter exaggerates?

Strategy: Correct the reporter in a friendly manner; do not repeat the exaggeration in your answer.

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Situation: What if a reporter stresses the negative?

Strategy: Stress the reassuring positive actions being taken.

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Situation: What if a reporter misstates the situation?

Strategy: Warmly say, "We don't see it that way."

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Situation: What if a reporter says you're not doing enough?

Strategy: Don't repeat the accusation. Simply restate the actions being taken.

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Situation: What if reporter says something that is not true?

Strategy: Correct and then state the truth.

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Situation: What if you have information you are not sure is correct?

Strategy: Do not use it until you are sure it is correct.

Situation: What if the reporter asks about the incorrect information that you have?

Strategy: Say you can't confirm it, but will when and if you can.

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Situation: Speculative "what if" questions. . .

Strategy: Say you don't want to speculate, but you want the people to know you are doing everything possible on their behalf.

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Situation: What if the reporter misses the news conference and another isn't scheduled?

Strategy: Give a private interview if it serves your strategy.

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Situation: What if reporters want you for individual live interviews?

Strategy: Do them if they serve your strategy.

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Situation: What do you do in a live situation?

Strategy: Hit your main messages immediately and briefly and find ways to return to them as often as possible.

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Situation: What if a reporter wants to go off the record?

Strategy: Do not do it.

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Situation: What information is on the record?

Strategy: Everything said within sight and sound of a reporter.

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Situation: What if I stumble?

Strategy: As long as it is not a factual error, just keep talking, especially if live. If embarrassing and on tape, say you want to start over.

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Situation: Should you be positive in the face of tragedy?

Strategy: No. Be caring, reassuring and non-defensive.

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Situation: How much should I engage in small talk?

Strategy: Be wary of it. It is a good source of embarrassing quotes. Remember there is safety in silence.

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Situation: What if I am baited to attack a person?

Strategy: Challenge ideas and issues instead of people, if possible.

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Situation: What if the reporter surprises me?

Strategy: Stop and ponder the question thoughtfully and silently, then answer.

Our Rules

Rockingham County Schools News Guidelines

Issuing Press Releases: Good News and Bad News

Rockingham County Schools News Guidelines

For News Reporters

Although schools are public institutions, the principal or administrator in charge may limit access within the building and on school grounds for the safety of students and staff.

To ensure that media needs are met, news staffs are asked to follow these guidelines:

- Reporters should call ahead to the school, or in the event of a fast-breaking news event, the Public Information Officer, to arrange a visit.

- Reporters and cameramen, as all visitors, are required to sign in at the school office and must have authorization from the principal or administrator in charge to be on campus. All visitors must wear badges provided by the school office while on campus.

- Reporters cannot interrupt classes unless prior notice is given by the principal or administrator in charge. Reporters cannot interfere with school or police investigations; updates will be provided to reporters on a timely basis when deemed necessary.

- Reporters may receive access to school activities, classrooms, staff and students only at the discretion of the principal or the administrator in charge.

- Reporters are not allowed into classrooms involved in testing.

For School Officials

In all cases, the school system's first priority is the students and their safety. However, arrangements will be made to accommodate the news media in a timely fashion.

Unless otherwise noted, the principal is the designated spokesperson for his/her school. However, calls may be referred to the Public Information Officer, who will obtain information from the reporter as to the nature of his/her inquiry and respond in a timely fashion.

News media are asked to call the Public Information Office (627-2633 or 627-2600) for a report on fast-breaking events.

In the event of an emergency or an incident at school, staff members are required to report such activity immediately to the Superintendent's Office and the Public Information Officer.

The school's principal or designee also will set up and staff an easily accessible area for the media to receive frequent updates as developments warrant. The principal is asked to assign a staff member (or staff members) to escort the media to the area for updates.

EXCEPTIONS to this procedure:

- Sports.
- Events open to the public.
- Information gathered by student reporters for inclusion in print media.

Issuing Press Releases: Good News/Bad News

Good News

The Public Information Officer issues press releases throughout the school year and into the summer months. Schools, however, can and should send out information when possible.

The key is timeliness. A press release from an event that is two months old is not likely to appear in a local newspaper. Letting the media know of an event less than a week in advance significantly curtails a school's chances of good news coverage.

When the event/honor/award is something that could be considered a "major news story" (i.e. likely to be on Page 1 in the local newspaper), school staff members are asked to submit the information to the Public Information Officer so it can reach the widest possible audience at the same time.

Please make a copy of anything you send to the newspapers and forward it to me for my records.

Bad News

The North Carolina Open Records Act allows the public to have access to all police reports, except those in certain cases involving juveniles (children under 16). By law, newspapers/media outlets can print the names of the victim, witnesses and those charged with a particular crime, though most publications use discretion for all but major crimes.

Information usually is available by seeking reports at the local police stations, but in some cases, press releases are issued by the law enforcement agency to local media outlets on major crimes.

In the interest of fairness to all schools, media and parents, it is at times necessary to make information available to local newspapers about crimes on campus. These include, but are not limited to, weapons, drugs/alcohol, assaults and burglaries/thefts/larceny.

When an on-campus crime occurs in which police are notified and charges filed, the Superintendent and the Public Information Officer will issue the following information:

- Date, time and place offense occurred.
- Name of person (if over 16 and charge is a felony), age, grade classification.
- Victim's name, if injuries require trip to hospital; this information is public regardless of victim's age if hospitalization occurs.
- Charges filed.
- Punitive action taken by school principal/administration.

Narrative information on what took place will be acquired through reports filed by law enforcement agencies. These reports are available to the general public.