

# Don't stop the presses — work with them!

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How to deal with reporters  
and editors from newspapers,  
TV stations and radio stations

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A guide for  
school board  
members  
and school districts  
from  
**Ohio School  
Boards  
Association**



## Quick Tips

*Do collect your thoughts.*

*Do stick to what you know.*

*Do talk about what you're doing.*

*Do speak to audience interest.*

*Do know that candor builds credibility.*

*Do be polite.*

*Do be conversational.*

*Do expect what you say to be printed or aired.*

*Do think long term.*

*Do return calls.*

*Do analyze carefully.*

*Do check out details.*

*Do provide background.*

*Do keep it short.*

*Do follow your media policy.*

*Do anticipate questions.*

*Do look them in the eye.*

— Judy Parker, APR,  
communications consultant,  
CommunicationPlus, June  
1997.

## Work with the media — and get them to work with you

The news media can play a vital role in helping you provide your community with information about your schools.

Understanding and working with the news media is especially crucial as school districts deal with complex issues in an ever-changing society.

**Why do we need to foster a good working relationship with news media representatives?**

- By developing a relationship based on trust, we will have more opportunities to encourage news media coverage of “good news,” not just controversial or bad news.

- The news media can help us achieve our goal of providing the community with an ongoing, solid core of information about its schools.

- The news media is a valuable communications channel that reaches parents, non-parents, senior citizens and others in your community on a regular basis.

- Radio, television and newspapers can all play a major role in promoting the understanding and awareness of education and in encouraging support and cooperation for change.

- The news media can provide a quick way to thwart rumors and misinformation.

**Why should we adjust to media needs?**

Most of us realize radio stations, television stations and newspapers are not promotional mouthpieces for schools. Their primary purpose, in most cases, is to deliver hard news as quickly and efficiently as possible,

particularly in large metropolitan areas. Space or air time is tight and schools are generally not considered a top priority. However, most news media, particularly the rural or suburban newspapers and radio/TV stations, regularly cover school happenings. Our goal should be to make this coverage as easy for them as possible.

**How can you find out what is happening that might be newsworthy?**

- Set up a news network and recruit a representative from each school and department who is responsible for relaying newsworthy activities to the community relations office or a designated district spokesperson.

- Distribute news tip sheets at schools, cafeterias, support staff sites, offices, etc., which ask staff and students to submit ideas.

- Request news tips through district newsletters and community newspapers.

- Ask school board members and parent organization leaders for tips and ideas.

**How can you make the news media aware of stories that are representative of your entire school district?**

- Provide news tips to radio stations, TV stations and newspapers on a daily basis.

- Provide a biweekly media tip sheet that summarizes 10 possible story ideas and furnishes the names and phone numbers of people to contact for more information.

- Provide story ideas on your district's computerized Internet "home page."
- Hold news briefings whenever there is a need to explain details of a story to all reporters at the same time. (Know the deadline schedules of all news media that cover your school district, and schedule briefings at times that will allow reporters to meet those deadlines. If your district is covered by a large number of news organizations, vary the scheduling of such briefings so that you don't always favor one newspaper over another or one electronic medium over another.)
- Provide reporters with ideas for colorful feature stories editors can use to fill extra space or air time.

#### **What are some common characteristics of a good news release?**

- Be brief and describe who, what, where, when, why and how. Remember, you are competing for an editor's attention with stacks of other news releases and paperwork.
- Use an easy-to-read, quickly-recognizable format.
- Discard educational jargon and use language that is clear and concise.
- Provide supplemental materials for complicated information, such as test results, budgets, educational restructuring, new legislation and bond/levy proposals.
- To increase credibility, share bad news just as quickly and just as accurately as good news. In other words, present information directly and honestly when a crisis occurs.
- Don't waste an editor's time with promotional "puff stuff." Be sure information is newsworthy.
- Alert reporters to school programs/events that tie in with national or local holidays.
- Clearly identify all individuals and locations in still photos or videotape. Also, make sure appropriate release forms have been signed for any still

photos or videotape that you produce or authorize.

- Be sure information is timely.
- Know and respect deadlines.

#### **Additional ways school districts have successfully worked with the news media:**

- Publish the district's annual school report as a supplement to the local newspaper and print extra copies for distribution to residents who don't receive the newspaper.
- Prepare a monthly report for use as a community service by radio/television stations. Use this technique to introduce a new superintendent or to give your community a state-of-the-schools address.
- Produce television programs on topics such as test scores, educational restructuring or the district's mission which can be aired on a local cable channel. Consider including time for questions from a panel of journalists and distributing a written summary of the main points to local newspapers.
- Prepare a brief but catchy video showing education in action by featuring students in a variety of classroom settings.
- Arrange for reporters to interview the superintendent, school board members, administrators, teachers, support staff or students on pertinent, timely issues.

— Ann Hagen, *communications consultant*, CommunicationPlus, April 1996.

## Quick Tips

***Don't wing it.***

***Don't speculate.***

***Don't knock competitors.***

***Don't brag about yourself.***

***Don't manipulate.***

***Don't lose your cool.***

***Don't use trade jargon.***

***Don't go off the record.***

***Don't think short term.***

***Don't stiff reporters.***

***Don't leap at opportunities.***

***Don't assume they know.***

***Don't say "no comment."***

***Don't shoot your own foot.***

***Don't forget your messages.***

***Don't be awestruck.***

— Judy Parker, *APR, communications consultant*, CommunicationPlus, June 1997.

## Quick Tips

**Have** one person who deals with the media.

**Set** rules and procedures for meetings where hot topic will be discussed.

**Be** honest, consistent and not evasive.

**Don't** over react. Investigate thoroughly and attempt to put details into perspective.

**Develop** strategies for communicating with key audiences.

**Be** precise. Don't give more details than necessary.

**Respond** to requests for information in a timely fashion.

**Keep** all members of the school board completely informed.

**File** all reports to public agencies that are required by law.

— Judy Parker, APR, communications consultant, CommunicationPlus, June 1997.

## Sound bites that make sense: Handling TV interviews

Dealing with an interview on television can be intimidating. Having a camera catching your every word and talking with a microphone inches from your face is often scary. Here is some advice for dealing with TV interviews.

### Before the interview

- Ask the right questions when you are contacted by a television station's reporter or assignment editor. Find out exactly what topic the reporter wants to talk about and why the television station is pursuing the story.

There's considerable difference between a simple story highlighting accomplishments of the district and the kind of interview you face if the reporter is seeking a response to a potentially damaging situation.

- Give yourself time to prepare. If at all possible, agree on an interview time that will allow time to research the facts and think about what you are going to say.

- Gather all the facts before you are interviewed. This step is especially critical in a crisis or controversial situation. Find out everything you can before you face the interviewer. If the interview was prompted by an unfavorable situation for the district, plan an honest, straightforward response. A good formula for a crisis situation is:

**Context** ("We transport more than 10,000 students a day on district buses and this is the first time in five years we have had an instance of a student not safely reaching his

destination.")

**Apology** ("We apologize for any concern that might have been caused to the parents of this youngster because he/she got off at the wrong stop.")

**Future** ("We are investigating this incident to see what really happened and will do everything possible to continue to ensure that our students are safe at all times.")

- Make a list of specific talking points. Think about the primary message you want to get across. Remember to focus on students and what your district is trying to do for and with them.

- Practice your message in short "takes." Keep answers short and succinct. Practice ways to say your message in very short phrases. Try to condense your main point to 10-20 seconds. This helps keep it from being edited into something that will surprise you when you hear it on the evening news.

- Think about the impression the location of your interview will make. Images are powerful. Positive images of students and schools as a backdrop for your interview or the focus of the story can be more powerful than anything you say. Your manner can convey more than words. If you are relaxed and assured, viewers will have confidence in you and your ability as a board member to see that schools are run effectively and efficiently.

- Be on time for the interview. Nothing alienates reporters more



than having to wait around for an interview when they have to get back to their station and edit film before it can go on the evening news.

- Relax. Force yourself to breathe deeply, relax your muscles and assume a confident, assured facade.

#### **During the interview**

- Choose your words carefully. Take time to think before answering a question and choose words that will help the audience think with you. For example, if asked about violence in schools, talk about how safe your schools are and your concern for continuing student safety. Avoid repeating the inflammatory or negative words (“violence”) contained in the question.

- Communicate a consistent message. Stick to your theme and the impression you want to convey with this interview.

- Keep things simple. Don’t try to explain anything in detail. Reduce comments to their simplest, most easily understood denominators. This is especially true of complicated issues such as school funding.

- Be honest and candid. Tell the truth. Never, never lie or even elaborate on the truth during an interview. We have all seen politicians and other prominent citizens have their own words hurled back at them because of discrepancies in what they said. Being honest, however, does not mean you have to tell everything you ever knew about the subject of the interview. You do not have to volunteer bad news. If the reporter doesn’t ask, don’t volunteer.

- Clarify if you are speaking for yourself or the entire school board. Board members may agree that only one person will be speaking for the group, especially when there is a crisis.

- Don’t fall for the bait. If the reporter asks you leading, loaded, baited, speculative, multiple-part, forced-choice and other types of questions, don’t fall for them. Choose the part of

the question that best lends itself to making your point and then only answer that part of the question.

- Make your answers interesting enough to plant the seed for follow-up questions from the interviewer.

This can lead the interview into a positive, productive direction.

- Set the stage for future, positive stories about your schools. No matter what the subject of this particular interview, take this opportunity to tell the reporter about positive things happening in your schools and suggest some that would make good television stories.

- Thank the reporter for caring enough about schools to pursue this story. If it is on a controversial subject, thank the reporter for caring enough to find out both sides of the story and present it fairly. Most reporters want to be accurate and fair. Your acknowledgment of that will gain their respect.

#### **After the interview**

Watch to see how you did. See if you managed to get your key messages across effectively so they weren’t edited out and if you looked relaxed, assured and in control. What kind of setting did you use? Did it make your schools and district look good? Did you somehow reiterate the mission of the district and your successes in reaching that mission?

— Gay Campbell, APR,  
communications consultant,  
CommunicationPlus, February 1996.

## Quick Tips

**Know** your values.

**Know** how the political process works.

**Know** your role.

**Listen** to everyone, but don’t try to please everyone.

**Understand** the issues and who is affected.

**Separate** issues from personalities.

**Be** honest and truthful.

**Use** plain language.

**Don’t** label people.

**Don’t** lose your temper or be rude.

**Don’t** be confrontational.

**Don’t** try to manipulate.

**Don’t** threaten.

**Don’t** take general comments personally.

**Don’t** carry grudges.

— Judy Parker, APR,  
communications consultant,  
CommunicationPlus, June  
1997.

## Quick Tips

*Ohio's Open Records Law defines a "public record" as any record kept by a school district, with certain exceptions. Ohio law requires that all public records be promptly prepared and made available for inspection to any person at all reasonable times during business hours. Copies must be made available at a reasonable cost. The public is entitled to access regardless of the record's location or format, including e-mail, magnetic or video tape, and traditional paper formats. Almost all personnel files (including performance evaluations and salaries), job applications, and letters from the superintendent to board members are considered part of public record. In a school setting, the most common example of records whose release is prohibited by state and federal law is student records.*

**For a copy of the OSBA publication *Ohio School Records Guide*, contact OSBA at (614) 540-4000.**

# News releases can tell your story — if you write them well

Sometimes, the best way to get your message to the media is in writing. A situation may warrant communicating with precision. In these cases, putting a message in a news release gives you time to think out your response. It also reduces the likelihood of being misquoted or having your position misunderstood.

At other times, the media may not have the resources to cover an event or issue. In such cases, they may be willing to give you some news coverage if you send a news release.

Writing a news release can be intimidating. Using the following advice should help, though.

- Be concise. A good way to start is to ask, "What am I trying to say?" Then, speaking out loud, deliver your basic message in 30 words or less. If you want to take a breath, or if the sentence seems long to you, your message can probably be condensed.
- Give the media the Five W's and one H: Who, what, when, where, why and how. The most important of these are often "what," "how" and "why" something is being done rather than who is doing something, where it will be or when it is being done.
- Write your news releases in terms of why a reader or viewer would be interested in your story. That's how reporters and editors think and make news judgments. Just because YOU think the district should get recognition does not mean John Doe will be as excited.
- Write as if you are talking to your neighbor. Use simple, not flowery,

language. Cut out all jargon or other educationese.

- A good way to pare back your writing is to consider every word — especially adjectives and adverbs — and ask if it can be removed. Ask yourself: "If I had to pay per word for this article, would I pay for this word?"
- Use simple examples to illustrate complicated concepts. This is especially true in stories involving many numbers.
- This goes without saying, but use correct grammar, spelling and punctuation.
- Call ahead and talk to the media's education reporter or editor. If possible, hand deliver your news release. This gives you the opportunity to persuade the media to use your story. It's also tougher for reporters and editors to say "No" in person.
- Always include contact names and phone numbers where they can be reached, preferably day and night.
- Be selective when asking the media for coverage. While it is true "the squeaky wheel gets the oil," it's also true that the boy who cries wolf eventually will be ignored.
- When writing, avoid clichés such as "the squeaky wheel gets the oil" and "the boy who cries wolf."
- Strive to be timely. It's unlikely the media will consider a news release in July about your district's holiday pageants.
- Use complete names in news releases, photos and videotape. Do

# Sample news release

**Date, contact** → January 21, 2000  
Contact: John Stevens  
Phone: (555) 555-5555

**First two paragraphs: Who, what, when, where, why and how.** → **Stevens urges renewing tutoring program**  
Because of improving scores by Smithjones High School freshmen, Smithjones School Board President John Stephens is urging his district to continue a successful afterschool program for at-risk students.

**Use complete names and titles** → The program, funded by the board in January, is up for renewal at Tuesday's school board meeting. The meeting will be at Smithjones Administration Building.

**Start with the most important of these pieces of information. Often, the most important of these is why.** → High school freshmen have improved their scores on the state-mandated test an average of 7% since the afterschool program was initiated. The program offers students one-on-one help from teachers, who are paid through a special fund set up by the school board.

**Use specific examples:** → "The results of this program are the proof in the pudding," Stephen said. "Cutting funding now would be the worst thing we could do for those students working so hard to pass these tests."

**Use strong quotes:** → Nearly 32 students enrolled in the afterschool program have passed the proficiency tests.

**Be concise** → --- more ---  
---30---

**Indicates news release continues** → --- more ---  
**Indicates end of news release** → ---30---

## Quick Tips

*Ohio's Sunshine Law requires that all acts and deliberations of school boards, including their committees and subcommittees, be conducted in public. Boards must set up rules by which any person may learn the time and place of all regular meetings and the time, place and purpose of special meetings. This rule also requires notification of any media that so requests. A meeting is defined as any prearranged discussion of the public business of the board, a committee or subcommittee by a majority of its members. Executive sessions are for deliberation only — no action may take place. These sessions permit discussion only of personnel issues, real estate purchases or sales, legal matters, contract negotiations and specialized details of security arrangements.*

**For a brochure with more thorough information on Ohio's Sunshine Law, contact OSBA.**

not refer to a teacher as Mr. Smith or a superintendent as Ms. Jones without a first name.

- When relevant, make sure you thank the media outlets for their interest in education and for giving you an opportunity to get your side of the story across.

- Give your news release a title that sums up its purpose. Much like a newspaper headline, it should give the reader a quick indication of what the news release is about.

- Consider providing an

accompanying sheet of quick facts, especially with complicated stories. This can spark questions for reporters and editors and help you direct the story in the direction you want it to go.

— David Ball, OSBA communications specialist

## Quick Tips

### Other OSBA resources

**CommunicationPlus**, mailed 10 times a year to subscribers, includes articles covering topics such as dealing with the media, board relations, school-community relations, crisis communication and more. Each issue includes items districts can copy and use, including news releases. Annual subscriptions are just \$325 and can be shared with the entire district!

A free list of local media contacts, organized by county, is on OSBA's website: [www.osba-ohio.org](http://www.osba-ohio.org)

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## Getting positive editorials is no accident

Newspaper editors must come up with daily or weekly editorials and/or columns on topics of interest to their readers. These opinion essays are often written under deadline pressure and reflect the writer's understanding of the issue or topic.

School boards across the country are both subjects of positive editorials for their achievements, changes or actions, and recipients of criticism and negative reprimands. In many cases, positive editorials are no accident. Editorial writers depend on you and your staff for complete, timely information.

Don't presume a reporter's news or feature article will result in a positive editorial in the same newspaper. In some news organizations, editorial writers and the reporters hardly talk to each other. That's why you need to talk to the editorial writers and the reporters covering your schools.

Schedule at least semiannual meetings with local newspapers' editorial boards for a background briefing. Arrange for the board president, superintendent and other key administrators to attend. Lay out your school district's plans, problems and potential. Be frank.

Try to establish a personal relationship with editorial writers. It's easier for writers to pick up the phone to ask a question or challenge your action before writing about it if they know you personally.

Be sure editorial writers receive your district news releases at the same time reporters do.

After a major school board action,

check in with the editorial writer to see if they have any questions.

Always be candid with editorial writers, remembering, of course, that nothing is off the record. Tell the truth. Your long-term credibility isn't worth one positive editorial.

Give editorial and news writers a "fact sheet" or "question and answer sheet" on major issues. Be sure it clearly answers the hard questions your constituents have asked you.

Avoid playing favorites. Even though newspaper "A" may be your friend and newspaper "B" always seems to be against you, provide both with complete information.

Don't whine when you get what you consider a "bad" editorial. Rather, analyze it carefully. Did it raise new points or concerns? Did it reflect a misunderstanding or lack of information about the issue? If so, blame yourself and take positive steps to set the record straight. Consider a letter-to-the editor, written in a positive tone, laying out the information the editorial did not.

Write your own editorial. Such articles should give new information or perspectives on the board's work — not a rehash of what already has been reported.

Keep communications with journalists out of board meetings. Nothing annoys reporters more than being asked to "emphasize this point" during a meeting or public criticism. Cajole or coach privately.

— Dorothy Dubia, communications consultant, **CommunicationPlus**, May 1997.