

Tips for Working with the Media

A trusting school district–media relationship is vital to district–community relationships.

By Gail M. Zeman



What do school business administrators and media reporters have in common? Not much, you say? Consider this:

Media reporters have a job to do.
So do school business officials.

Media reporters talk to the public.
So do school business officials.

Media reporters are required to know enough about a broad range of topics to convey accurate, timely, balanced information that their audience will understand.
So do school business officials.

The media world is experiencing massive changes and cutbacks.
So is public education.

Your local education reporter can be your best friend or your worst enemy. Spending some time getting to know reporters, developing a sense of trust, and recognizing that you can meet each other's needs can go a long way toward making the school district–media relationship positive and symbiotic.

Many districts have public information officers—even departments—that deal with the media every day. But it is good for school business officials to get to know the local media and offer themselves as a resource regarding school finance issues.

A good relationship with local reporters will prompt them to contact you to share information or a question they've encountered in the field. Such rapport provides you an opportunity to help the media tell an accurate story while keeping yourself informed about what's going on in the community.

When a new education beat reporter is assigned to your school district, or if you are new to a district, introduce yourself to the reporter and exchange contact information. Find out about the reporter's deadlines, interests, and background. This overture is the first step in developing a bond of trust with your local media on which you can build better information flow.

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Keep in mind that most members of the public do not have children in your district and will get the majority of their information about the schools from the local paper, television and radio, and online. The more background information you give your reporters, the more accurate and insightful their stories will likely be.

If you are the designated expert or point person for a particular area, such as transportation or finance, and can provide clear, accurate information, do so. (Caveat: Provide facts and explanations, not opinions; opinions will likely be interpreted or reported as fact. And don't give any information "off the record." You have little control over that information once it's left your lips, even if you've made it clear you don't want it shared.) If you have difficulty translating complex financial in-

formation into layman's terms, ask someone to help you develop charts, graphs, and informative sound bites.

Don't hand reporters a budget document and expect them to write a cogent story the public will understand. Instead, provide the information and point out the highlights. Remember, reporters are always looking for the lead around which to focus their story. And editors will likely use that lead, or information early in the story, to write the headline. Provide a good lead-in—even a suggested headline—so you can have some input into both and possibly contribute to a positive tone for the article.

Also recognize that district and school Websites should be the primary source of basic public education information and therefore must be accurate and current. An out-of-date Website reflects poorly on the school district. Work with the public information officer and technology department to ensure all school business management-related information on the district Website is current, accurate, and easy to understand.

Most reporters and school business officials inherit a school district-media relationship. If that relationship is positive, it's your responsibility to foster it. If it's negative, take the time to help turn it around. It's well worth the effort.

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