

The Media and the Board

School board members and reporters have more in common than you may think. Reporters need school board insights, information and cooperation. Likewise, board members need reporters' insights, information and cooperation. By working with the news media representatives in your community, you can improve your image, enhance the coverage of the district and gain useful understanding of the community you represent.

Here are some ways you can create a climate of mutual assistance.

Tips for Success

- Watch your words. As a school board member you are a public official. What you say is news and, in varying degrees, influences public opinion.
- There is no such thing as a dumb question from a reporter, even though it may seem that he or she obviously hasn't read the agenda material or hasn't done his or her homework. Sometimes reporters ask questions just to get an explanation that can be quoted.
- If the reporter's manner is confrontational, don't respond in kind. Stick to what you want to say and repeat your main points if necessary.
- Recognize that your comments may be summarized or paraphrased. Often reporters will build one concise statement out of several lengthy ones.
- Treat reporters as the professionals they are. Don't tell them what to say in a story or what stories they should write. Do, however, provide them with ideas for stories they might be interested in checking out.
- If you expect the media to provide balanced, fair, accurate and interesting coverage of your schools, make sure the information you provide is balanced, fair, accurate and informative.
- Stay informed. While the superintendent and/or a designee will handle the bulk of media contacts about your school district, you may be asked to comment on an issue about which the board has not yet made a decision. If this happens, carefully choose what you say and emphasize that your opinions are not those of the entire school board. If the issue is particularly sensitive, decline to comment until you are sure of the board's position even though you have strong feelings about the matter. Promise reporters that you will get back to them when you can answer

their questions, and then be sure to do so.

Establishing and Keeping a Good Relationship

- Expect to have a good relationship with reporters. Even if you have been burned by another reporter from the same newspaper or station, don't presume every reporter has the same attitudes, skills or knowledge.
- Cultivate a positive relationship with reporters who cover your district by being available, friendly, honest and frank.
- Occasionally ask reporters for their opinions. Probe to determine how they think your district and board is regarded in the community.
- When you attend school activities, service club meetings, chamber of commerce gatherings or community affairs, be sure to greet any reporters present.
- If there is an error in an article or broadcast, contact the reporter first, not the publisher, editor or director. If the error is the reporter's fault, oftentimes it will be clarified in a follow-up article or broadcast. Sometimes though, the error is due to lack of information. The reporter will appreciate your help in making other coverage of the topic accurate.
- Reporters generally don't write headlines, so if a headline is misleading, talk to the editor.
- Take time to meet personally with reporters who are assigned to your district. If you notice a new reporter at a school board meeting, introduce yourself, provide him or her your business and home telephone numbers and show an interest in the reporter as an individual.
- Keep in touch with the management of local newspapers, radio stations and television stations throughout the year-not just during election time. It is mutually beneficial for a board member and the superintendent occasionally to meet informally with editors, publishers and station managers to share information.
- Subscribe to all the papers that cover your district so you can know what's being written about the schools. Also tune in to local radio and television stations.

In Troubled Times . . .

- Always tell the truth, even if it hurts. It will hurt worse if the reporter has to dig out the facts because you haven't been honest.

- If you cannot discuss an issue with a reporter because of its sensitivity, tell the reporter directly rather than evading questions. However, also tell the reporter when someone from the district will be able to answer questions about the issue, and then be sure the reporter is contacted when the information/answer is available.
- Don't ask a reporter to let you review a story before it is published or aired. If, however, you are discussing a situation in which legal restrictions demand specific language-and you want to review the material before publication or broadcast, then stipulate this as a condition of granting the interview. Be sure to explain why you are making the request. The reporter will appreciate your candor.
- Return reporters' calls as quickly as possible, even if you know the call is about a negative event or rumor. Whether the news is good or bad, the best policy is to be consistently open, forthright and helpful.
- If your board is dealing with an issue involving a staff member, be sure the media is well aware of the employee's right to privacy.
- When the media calls, keep your answers brief and to the point. Don't ramble, or you may reveal confidential information with a slip of the tongue.
- Don't speculate. Even if you've got a good, educated guess, don't share it. you may not have all the pertinent information or circumstances may have changed.
- If you don't want your words repeated or quoted, don't say them. Most reporters are people of integrity who will keep your confidences for background information. But can you or your district afford the consequences of having information you shared in confidence published or broadcast? It frequently is easy for a reporter to turn information received "off-the-record" into an "on-the-record" quote from another source.
- If you are asked to comment on a decision of the board with which you disagreed, stand by the board's action. Don't fuel the fires of controversy by taking your colleagues on in the media.

At Board Meetings

- Ask your superintendent to provide full agenda materials to reporters. This includes not only the face sheet of the agenda but the back-up

material, too.

- Understand that a reporter at your board meeting represents hundreds-perhaps thousands-of constituents who are not sitting in the audience. Speak up. Your constituents-and staff, too, for that matter-have a right to know how you feel about an issue and why you are voting as you are.
- In all dealings with reporters, remember their role is to provide objective, accurate information. It is not to make the school district look good. If the board argues, expect to see it reported in the paper.
- Make covering your board meetings as easy as possible for reporters. If you are presenting a prepared statement on a controversial issue, for example, be sure copies are available for them. Encourage the staff to provide fact sheets and/or a chronology of events for background information.
- Never impugn a newspaper's or broadcast media's coverage at an open board meeting. It embarrasses and sometimes angers reporters, even those working for the competition.
- Compliment reporters on the good coverage they give your schools. But, as with criticism, the time for praise is not *during* an open board meeting. Reporters may react negatively to having it seem like they are your spokespersons or your "mouthpieces." School public relations is not their responsibility.

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