

## ► MEDIA RELATIONS FACTS & TIPS

### *General interview tips for all media*

1. Never respond to statistics or statements represented as fact unless you have independently verified them yourself. (A reply might be “I haven’t seen those numbers” or “that’s not my understanding of the situation at this time...but once we have a chance to review it we’ll be in a position to talk about it”.... or “I’m sorry, it appears we used different sources and I’m not familiar with the one you are citing.”)
2. If you have a sensitive news story or even a feature coming that will be published or aired, tell your employees first - whether it’s good or bad news. Again, we in Communications can help you put together the statement, etc. (examples Food Service)
3. Never comment on office policy unless you are authorized to do so.
4. If a query falls outside your area of expertise, say so and refer the reporter to the correct source.
5. Don’t respond to rumor or hearsay.
6. Never bluff if you don’t know an answer, but offer to check into it and get back to the reporter.
7. The media is often friendly, but they are not your friends, even if they are your neighbors.
8. As a rule, never tell a reporter you will go over their head to an editor.
9. And if you do decide to talk to the reporter’s editor, tell the reporter you intend to take that course of action.
10. Identify 2-3 key messages you want to deliver and stick to them
11. Use anecdotes and facts to illustrate your points
12. Target your messages to your most important audience, i.e., parents, community, school districts.
13. Be brief - to the point. For broadcast interviews, try to convey our key messages in 15 seconds or less. Use short, snappy, colorful quotes.
14. Your responses should stand on their own. Speak in complete sentences, since the reporter’s question is rarely included in the story.
15. Acknowledge the reporter’s questions and bridge to your messages.
16. Use plain language. Don’t use acronyms, jargon and “educationese.”
17. Provide brief, succinct background materials.
18. Be honest, open and cooperative. Never lie.
19. Anticipate difficult questions (your communication staff can assist).
20. Never say “no comment.” It sounds as if you’re hiding something. If necessary, explain why it is not appropriate or impossible for you to answer the question.  
*(See handout options to no comment)*
21. Never bad mouth another agency or individual. You can say you agree to disagree on that issue, but don’t publicly trash a person or organization. You may have to work with them again.
22. Never speak to a reporter “off the record” unless you want it “on the record.”

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## ► THE MEDIA INTERVIEW

### *Print, Television, Radio, Web*

#### **Newspaper or other print**

Newspapers or magazines usually want significant detail and specifics. They will ask more of the “what” and “how” type questions. They will also be seeking quotes and specifics, including examples. Often, they will speak to more than one source (which you may not know until after the fact), which again underscores the need for a specific and uniform message.

#### **Web Reporting**

Much the same format as newspaper and magazine, but much more brief. In addition, many Web stories have accompanying video clips. One caution about the Web is that virtually anything can be posted on the Web. And it may not be accurate, so if you’re going to quote from the Web, make certain the information is correct.

#### **The TV Interview**

- Before the interview, decide on your message and stick to it. If the questions are off-track or lead you in a direction you don’t want to go, just repeat your original message. This may irritate some TV reporters, but that’s not your problem. What’s important is that you come across as decisive on the message.
- When the TV camera’s red light is on, you are being recorded. Be weary of off-the-cuff or casual comments before the actual interview begins.
- Before the interview, introduce yourself to the reporter and the camera operator. Both should be treated with respect. And remember, it’s the camera person who ultimately decides how you will look on TV.
- Don’t be argumentative, but don’t be reluctant to tactfully correct inaccuracies (a transitional sentence could be along the lines of “what the real situation here is...” or “What we’re looking at here is....” or “As we understand the matter up to this point the...” .
- Avoid live shots or interviews whenever possible - unless you really know the topic, are prepared and adept at giving quick soundbites.
- Most interviews are taped. This means if you don’t like the way you said something, just say “I want to say this again,” and they will oblige unless you really went out on a limb with something very sensational.
- You’re dealing with a four second or shorter soundbite. Make your statement or soundbite as brief as possible. Most viewers can’t or won’t follow a lengthy statement.
- Gestures should be smaller.

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## Television and Videotape Tips –What to Wear

- Make sure clothing is “broken in” and comfortable when you are sitting and standing.
- Find out the background color of the set if possible. You don’t want your clothing to blend in and make you invisible.
- Ask the producer for wardrobe color suggestions.
- Do not wear any clothing with tight patterns or pin stripes. This causes an optical illusion called a moiré pattern which makes you look bad.
- Avoid clothing with large patterns or geometric shapes. The audience will watch your clothes instead of you.
- Avoid wearing black, white, or red on television or video. Even the best of cameras have trouble with these colors.
- Avoid flashy jewelry. It reflects light. Also avoid jangly jewelry. It reflects light and makes noise that will be picked up by your microphone.
- Wear your eyeglasses if you want, but avoid shiny frames. Tip the bows of your eyeglasses up slightly off your ears. This angles the lenses down to reduce glares from lights.
- Wear makeup. It has the practical purpose of reducing the glare of TV lights. Apply makeup to all exposed body parts, like backs of hands, arms, neck, etc. Apply cover-up below eyes to mask bags and/or wrinkles.
- Good studios are kept cool to negate the effect of the hot TV lights. You may freeze for a while until the lights are turned on, then you may burn up. Dress for the heat, but bring a jacket or extra cover-up to be used while you are waiting to go on.
- Bring a handkerchief or tissue to dab perspiration during breaks.
- Don’t second guess the camera. Act as if you are always on a screen.
- Make sure your make-up, wardrobe, and hair are consistent with your message.

## Video Conferencing

- If possible prior to the videoconference, send remote location participants handouts, copies of agenda, and copies of visuals.
- Try to get someone else to operate the camera and other equipment. Have them shoot close up if possible. With more than one presenter, if you leave the camera on a wide angle, the viewers will have trouble picking out who is talking.
- Periodically ask for feedback from the remote sites. Your chances for misunderstanding multiply when communicating electronically.
- Remember assume you are always on camera. Use the mute button for your microphone if you must converse off the main program.

## *T.V. Tips for Men*

*Wear knee-length socks.*

*Keep double-breasted jackets buttoned. Single-breasted jackets can be opened, but not too wide.*

*Wear Makeup! TV lights can penetrate several layers of skin. You can’t shave close enough to prevent whiskers from showing without makeup. Don’t forget makeup on receding hairlines or bald heads.*

*Trick: Run the thin part of your tie through the loop in the back of the main part of your tie then clip the thin part of your shirt below the loop. This will keep your tie perfectly centered without the tie clip showing.*

## *T.V. Tips for Women*

*Avoid vivid red lipstick or lip gloss. Stick to softer tones and dab lips with a little powder.*

*Consider dress shields if you perspire easily.*

*Make sure your hair will stay where you want it. You don’t want to be fooling with it while on the air.*

*Make sure a lavalier or lapel microphone and transmitter can be attached to your clothing.*

*Lillian Brown has written the best resource I know of on the topic of appearing on television. It’s called “Your Public Best: The Complete Guide to Making Successful Public Appearances in the Meeting Room, on the Platform and on TV” (New-market Press: New York 1989).*

## *Sample School District*

### ► **CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN**

A crisis can surface at any time, most often with little or no advance warning. A crisis can include a violent act, labor dispute, natural disaster or student or staff abduction, all of which require ongoing, accurate and rapid communications. The media may be out in full force and, if used properly, can assist in rumor control.

*Some basic steps that district staff should take in any crisis situation include:*

1. Keep a record of who called (including full name, news organization and telephone number), what information was requested and what you provided. (See attached form.)
2. Make certain only one person is speaking to the media unless other arrangements are made which have been communicated and approved by the communications officer or a senior management member.
3. Make certain there is ample staff to handle calls from the media and public, even if help must be obtained from other departments.
4. Write down each question asked by the media along with any supplemental information they are requesting.
5. If you cannot respond immediately to their inquiries, say so. Often it is better not to respond immediately. Take down their name and the information requested, and when they need the information. Once you get this information, make certain you respond. If for some reason the information is not available, make certain you convey this to the media.
6. Maintain message discipline. Make certain that you tell all news representatives the same story. Doing so reduces the chance of conflicting reports or wrong interpretations being released.
7. Do not editorialize, insert personal opinion or speculate. Give the facts or information that has been confirmed and no more. If you do not know the answer to a particular query, simply say so or say that you need to check it out before you respond.
8. If you are uncertain whether the news organization is legitimate, take down their phone number and call them back. If you are at the scene of a crisis and feel verification is necessary, ask that they provide an identification card or media credentials that show which news organization they represent.

### ► **MEDIA ACCESS TO CAMPUS**

*The California Attorney General concluded (79 Ops. Cal. Atty. Gen. 58 (1996)) that:*

- School administrators may require members of the news media to (1) register their presence on campus, (2) comply with other conditions for interviewing students, observing an event,  
or
- examining the curriculum being taught, and (3) leave the premises if their presence would interfere with the peaceful conduct of the activities of the school.
- School administrators may not require written parental permission before allowing members of the news media to interview students.

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The first question presented concerned whether members of the news media may enter without restriction school grounds, including classrooms, to interview students, observe events, or examine the curriculum being taught. May school administrators require them to register their presence on campus, impose other conditions in granting access, and deny access under certain conditions? The Attorney General concluded that reasonable restrictions may be placed upon members of the news media when they seek access to school grounds.

School officials may deny access to members of the news media, as they may deny access to anyone, if their presence would interfere with the peaceful conduct of the activities of the school. The Attorney General concluded that school administrators may require members of the news media to follow reasonable conditions while they are on school grounds in order to prevent interference with the orderly educational activities of the school. These conditions may restrict the news media representatives in the same manner that access by members of the general public may be limited, i.e., requiring registration, accompaniment by a staff member while on school grounds, and denial of permission to enter classes that are in session. Members of the news media, as well as members of the general public, may be asked to leave if it reasonably appears to school officials that such persons are committing acts likely to interfere with the peaceful conduct of the school's educational activities.

### **Parental Permission Before Media Interviews**

The second question presented concerns whether school administrators may require written parental permission before allowing members of the news media to interview particular students on campus. The Attorney General concluded that prior written parental permission may not be required.

A parent may, of course, instruct his or her child not to communicate with news media representatives. This is a matter for the exercise of parental discretion, whether the child is on or off school property.

## **MEDIA ACCESS TO STUDENT AND EMPLOYEE INFORMATION**

### **Student Records**

Districts may release "directory information" to the media. The district is required to have a policy identifying which categories of directory information can be released, and to whom. Parents must be informed of the district's policy and can object to the release of any directory information. Without prior parental permission, do not release a pupil's photograph unless it appears in a yearbook, newsletter or other source independent of the student's file.

*Student directory information includes:*

1. Name
2. Date and place of birth
3. Major field of study
4. Participation in sports and activities
5. Weight and height of athletes
6. Dates of attendance
7. Awards received
8. Most recent public or private school attended.

*School officials may deny access to members of the news media if their presence would interfere with the peaceful conduct of the activities of the school.*

## Employee Records

Employee personnel files are not necessarily public records. The disclosure of their contents can constitute an “unwarranted invasion” of privacy. In the absence of a public records request (which should be referred to legal counsel for advice), do not release employee information to the media without the employee’s permission, except as follows:

1. Confirmation of employment, date of hire
2. Position(s) held, classes taught, activities directed, teams coached
3. School or other facility where employee is assigned
4. Staff photo (let employees know in advance that photos will be released to media on inquiry, unless employee requests otherwise; yearbook photos of staff can be released in any event as these are already in the public domain)
5. Salary information (note: if an employee has a separate written contract-such as the superintendent-the document is public and any information contained within the document, including salary, can be released). Providing the applicable salary schedule may be sufficient.

### DO NOT:

1. Release employee addresses, phone numbers, social security numbers.
2. Summon employee to the office to be interviewed by the media, unless:
  - a. Employee is directed to serve as district spokesman
  - b. You wish to avoid having the media interview the employee elsewhere

## ► SPECIFIC CRISIS SITUATIONS

### Molestation or Sexual Abuse

The conduct may involve employee-student, student-student or employee-employee. In any event, the investigation and prosecution are under the jurisdiction of the criminal justice system. Because of law enforcement’s heavy involvement, the response from school officials should be minimal but consistent. Most often a prepared statement is shared with staff before it is released to the public, unless circumstances make this impossible. This does not mean you will not get media inquiries seeking other information. Any information you convey should relate to school actions, not what law enforcement may or may not do.

#### *What you can tell the media regarding employees:*

1. Confirm that the suspected employee works at your school district, only after the individual is identified by law enforcement.
2. Confirm the length of employment, after the name has been released by law enforcement.
3. Cite the district discipline policy related to this type of offense as it applies to employees.

#### *What you can tell the media regarding students:*

1. If a student is involved, confirm only that an act took place that involved an unnamed student and refer investigative type questions to law enforcement.
2. If school personnel made contact with law enforcement, you can confirm this if asked, but do not tell who at school contacted the authorities.
3. Cite the district discipline policy related to this type of offense as it applies to students.

*Employee personnel files are not necessarily public records. The disclosure of their contents can constitute an “unwarranted invasion” of privacy.*

*What you cannot publicly release or do:*

1. Release the name of the suspected employee or student to the media. (Even though law enforcement may do so. This differs from confirming their employment after law enforcement releases their name.)
2. Release or confirm the identity, age or sex of the suspected victim.
3. Release the nature of the alleged acts perpetrated on the victim.
4. Make any editorial comments or speculation about the innocence or guilt of either the victim or suspect, or the outcome of the investigation. Instead, stick to the school districts official position and perhaps issue a statement if applicable and authorized for release.

*What you should say to the news media:*

1. The safety and well-being of students and staff is our top priority and concern. Any allegation that their well-being may be in jeopardy is immediately investigated by our staff and reported to law enforcement. If students are involved, a report may also be required to child abuse authorities (i.e., child protective services)
2. This school district goes to extensive lengths to screen employees before they begin their first day on the job. This includes fingerprinting through the Department of Justice and background checks with prior employers.
3. It is our policy to cooperate fully with law enforcement and this case is no exception. Depending on the outcome of the inquiry, we will take the appropriate action necessary in addition to any actions that may take place within the justice system. Until the issue is brought to closure, the employee remains on administrative leave. (In the case of a student, on suspension.)

► **Death or Injury on Campus**

A student or employee death on campus will attract the news media. An injury may or may not bring news organizations, depending on the type and circumstances. The news media's right to be on your campus is subject to your duty to insure that order is maintained and the educational process is not disrupted. In addition, if the campus becomes a crime scene, news media access can be denied or restricted by law enforcement, not the school staff.

A communications officer can provide a helpful role in preparing written communications to the news media, parents, staff and others. These services assist the superintendent or site supervisor who needs to deal with school staff, students and the victims family while trying to maintain order.

*Steps to help control access:*

It is preferable that only one person, such as the superintendent or site supervisor, be authorized to work with the media. Talk only about school-related issues, such as campus control, staff communications, grief counselors, etc. Let law enforcement or the coroner handle specifics related to the death or injury.

Make certain the staff is informed. This can be done in writing, electronically or in face-to-face group meetings. Often, an email is most expedient. Be certain that you do not create any document that speculates about the details of the incident or assigns blame, without first consulting with your legal counsel.

Keep students separated from the media and keep staff assigned to maintain order and the educational environment. A tragedy may cause false rumors to travel through a school. If the media speaks to the students and reports these rumors, this can send many mixed messages that can create a negative impact on your school or school district. In cases when new developments surface, consider using your school district Website to post updates and control rumors.

*A communications officer can provide a helpful role in preparing written communications to the news media, parents and staff.*

*Suggested steps:*

1. If students are on the playground, ring the bell and get them to class.
2. Keep them in the classroom or in a safe location that limits disruption from media access.
3. If the media wants to show students on the playground, set up some ground rules in advance for example, that they will photograph the students but will not question them. The media does not need your permission to photograph students. However, you should avoid exposing students to media coverage during an emotional and traumatic time.
4. If requested by the media, and depending on the nature of the incident, you may elect to provide them a photograph of the student or staff member who is the victim of violence, but only after you know that the next of kin has been contacted. Obtain parental consent before releasing a student photo the school has on file. Never provide the photo of a special education student without prior written permission. A year book photo is public record.

*What you can do:*

1. Release the name of the school, its principal, faculty and number of students enrolled.
2. Discuss actions being taken to work with students and staff to help them cope with the tragedy.
3. Arrange media interviews with crisis counselors.
4. Work with the principals and staff to arrange media interviews with various staff members.
5. Release contents of communications sent to staff that explains the situation, providing they do not contain the name of the victim.

*What you cannot do:*

1. Release the identity of the dead or injured student. (You may confirm this in response to media inquires once the coroner or proper authority tells you that relatives have been notified.)
2. Speculate or release facts related to the cause of death or injury unless you are authorized or requested to do so by the investigating authorities.
3. Make any comment about the investigation other than that it is under way.
4. Release telephone numbers or the home addresses of the victim or the victims family, unless the family approves the release of this information.
5. Comment or speculate on any potential lawsuit or legal actions that might result from this tragedy.
6. Try to stop the media from interviewing students, faculty and others outside the classroom or school grounds. (This is why you try to control the scene.)

► **SCHOOL DELAY POLICY**

The district should ask parents to honor a school delay rather than attempt to drop students off at school. We believe that honoring the delay is better for students and parents because:

1. We never know if a delay will go to a full closure. If a parent drops off a student, it would be extremely difficult to send a student home, if the school site is forced to close. There maybe no bus transportation when a delay is called. Also, food service is delayed or even canceled on days when school is closed and there is no way for a child to be fed at school.
2. When fog is very heavy or when road conditions are bad for other reasons, it is hard for the teachers and aides to get to school on time. Many special education students are medically fragile and should not be on campus without specialized supervision.
3. If for some reason, a student is dropped at our instructional site, provide for the student until the parents are able to pickup that student.

*It is preferable that only one person, such as the superintendent or site supervisor, be authorized to work with the media.*

## ► SCHOOL BUS ACCIDENT

A report of a school bus accident, particularly if there are deaths or injuries, will alert the media. It also draws in law enforcement. In California, all school bus accidents are investigated by the California Highway Patrol (CHP). As the official or designated communications officer representing a school agency, it is critical that you not cross the line and talk to the media about an issue that should better be left to law enforcement.

- Never release the names of the students, even though this may be done by law enforcement.
- Never speculate on the cause of the accident. Refer any such inquiries to law enforcement.
- Communicate with law enforcement and let them know the only items you will be talking about pertain to the student-education side.
- You may release the bus drivers work history, years of employment, but not their performance evaluations or other personnel information. If there is no evidence of prior driving problems, you may so inform the media. If there is such a history, do not disclose or confirm.

### *What to Do First:*

1. Gather as much information as possible. Confirm the accuracy of any information you receive before releasing it. Designate yourself or one other person to field media calls. Never speculate. Only one person should handle media calls. This can be you or a member of your staff.
2. Tell the media only what you can confirm to be factual. There is nothing wrong with telling the media that not all the information they are seeking is available. Get their names and telephone numbers and get back to them as the information becomes available. Responsiveness ensures your credibility.
3. Do not speculate as to the cause of the accident or what party is at fault. This is a function of law enforcement.
4. Discuss only education-related specifics. This includes the number of children on the bus, their grade levels, destination of the bus, etc. (See enclosed questions)

### *Who to Notify:*

Calls from concerned parents will come at the same time you receive media inquiries. It is imperative that efforts to notify parents begin immediately, particularly if the accident is serious, involves injuries, etc. - have your staff help with this. If you are unable to fully respond to parent inquiries, take down their name and telephone number and get back to them as information becomes available. NEVER downplay or minimize the situation. Most will understand that you are still gathering facts. They will not, however, tolerate misleading statements.

- **Parent Notification:**  
The media will ask you if parents have been notified. Your response should be that you are in the process of doing so, recognizing that it is a time-consuming process, particularly since many parents may not be at home and must be contacted elsewhere.
- **Remember Your Staff:**  
Your staff, particularly the switchboard operator, will receive numerous phone calls. Notify the staff as soon as possible, even if your communication is only sketchy. You can provide more specifics later. The communication should include the individual designated to release information. As a rule, your staff should not learn about a transportation emergency from the media, although, at this time, this will be the case.
- **And Don't Forget:**  
Notify your insurance carrier and possibly legal counsel.

*As the designated communications officer representing a school agency, it is critical that you not cross the line and talk to the media about an issue that should better be left to law enforcement.*

### *Appoint a Stand-in*

If you are out of the office, your designee will have to put the procedure into motion. Make certain your staff knows who will take charge in the event of an emergency. Mention it at staff meetings so there is no question about the chain of command.

### *Student Information*

Many school agencies do not give the media the names of students on board the bus. This is due to laws that protect the confidentiality of the students. For specifics that apply to your situation, check with your legal counsel. Often the student identities are released by law enforcement and can be confirmed by the school agency.

KEEP IN MIND that yellow school buses involved even in minor accidents make for eye-catching color in newspapers and television, and are guaranteed to pique the radio listener's attention. An accident can overload your phone system in a matter of minutes. How you react and respond to these developments has a lot to do with how you and your office are perceived by the public.

### **Frequently Asked Questions about Bus Incidents:**

*Frequently asked questions following a bus accident or a transportation-related emergency include:*

1. The driver's age.
2. The driver's experience (years behind the wheel).
3. Did the driver have any prior accidents? If so, what party was at fault? DO NOT ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS.
4. What type of training do bus drivers receive?
5. When was the bus last inspected by the CHP?
6. When were the brakes last checked and/or replaced?
7. Did the bus have seat belts?
8. Why aren't school buses equipped with seat belts? (Note: effective July 1, 2005 - all newly manufactured school busses in California must be equipped with safety belts.
9. Are your bus drivers required to take a physical examination as a condition of employment or to continue employment? YOU MAY PROVIDE THE DATE OF THE DRIVER'S LAST PHYSICAL, BUT NOT DETAILS AS TO THE RESULTS OTHER THAN TO CONFIRM THAT THE DRIVER PASSED.
10. Do you require your bus drivers to take a drug and alcohol screening test? If so, how often?
11. What are the grade levels of students on the bus? (e.g., elementary, high school, etc.)
12. Were there injuries or deaths involved?
13. From where did the bus originate? What was its destination?
14. Have parents of students aboard the bus been notified?
15. Why are special education students transported for long distances?

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## **What the Media May Request:**

Should you experience a serious bus accident or other transportation emergency, it is recommended that you have the following ready to respond to media-public inquiries.

1. Service records showing when the California Highway Patrol last inspected the bus.
2. Information showing the training bus drivers receive

It is advised that you cooperate fully with the media and respond to inquiries as rapidly as possible. However, a delayed response is much better than an immediate response based on incomplete or inaccurate information. Any questions with respect to the cause of the accident should be referred to the California Highway Patrol which investigates all school bus accidents.

## **School Bus Driver Training Requirements:**

1. Drug and alcohol testing prior to employment and randomly throughout the year.
2. Background checks are done and driving records monitored through the DMV "pull notice" program.
3. Twenty hours of classroom instruction. The instruction deals with laws and regulations on the operation of a school bus.
4. Twenty hours of behind-the-wheel training in the presence of a certified instructor.
5. Successful completion of a driving test administered by the California Highway Patrol.
6. Bus driver certification must be renewed every four years. In the last year prior to expiration of the certification, the school bus driver must take 10 hours of classroom instruction. The instruction must be given by a certified instructor.
7. School bus drivers must receive 10 hours of in-service training each year.
8. School bus drivers must take a written exam on laws and regulations and also demonstrate a knowledge of first aid.
9. School bus drivers are required to complete a physical examination every two years to keep the school bus operator certificate valid.

### *First Aid Training*

School bus driver applicants must pass a written test demonstrating a knowledge of laws and regulations of school bus operation and first aid. If the applicant possesses an approved first aid certificate, the first aid portion may be waived.

### *Vehicle Inspection*

Daily inspection by driver. Safety check by mechanic every 45 days or 3,000 miles, whichever comes first. California Highway Patrol inspection annually.

*Any questions with respect to the cause of the accident should be referred to the California Highway Patrol which investigates all school bus accidents.*

### Check List – Transportation Emergency:

1. Who will notify parents of children on the bus?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Who will field media inquiries?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Who will assemble information to answer anticipated media questions?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Who will notify staff?  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. What provisions have been made to answer media inquiries after normal business hours?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What steps have been taken to ensure there are no discrepancies in the information given to parents and the media?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Which agency is investigating the accident?  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Who will handle second day or follow-up inquiries?  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Conduct media interviews away from picket signs or demonstrators. A different location lessens the possibility of interruptions or distractions being orchestrated during your interview.*

### ► EMPLOYEE STRIKES, WORK STOPPAGES, PICKETING

A public demonstration such as a picket line, sit-in, work stoppage, equipment or facility sabotage, sick-in, blue flu or other kind of protest is guaranteed to bring out the media. You can be assured that the group or organization orchestrating the demonstration will be the ones to alert the news media (often more than once). They likely will have well-rehearsed responses and signs that are designed to draw the medias attention and not necessarily designed to communicate the facts accurately.

If the media, particularly television, wants to interview you, conduct the interview away from the picket signs or demonstrators. A different location lessens the possibility of interruptions or distractions being orchestrated during your interview. It will also ensure that your message is heard in the event the demonstrators begin making noise that is picked up during the video taping or radio interview. This allows you to make your case without risking interruptions that divide the reporter's and viewers' attention from your message.

## ► CAMPUS CRIME & VIOLENCE

Violent criminal acts against individuals or other school violence will no doubts attract media. The California Penal Code specifically states that the media has a right to be on your campus. No site administrator should attempt to order the news media off campus. If, however, local law enforcement determines that the violence that took place on campus does, in fact, create a crime scene, media access can be restricted. Again, this option is open only to law enforcement.

*If you are the designated media contact person follow these guidelines:*

1. The school site principal or district superintendents are the people in charge. They should designate a spokesperson. This person should receive all media requests, help the principal or superintendent prepare written communications, advise senior staff and help structure the outcome.
2. If crisis counselors are on a scene, arrange for the media to talk to them.
3. If at all possible, make certain some form of communication gets home to parents. This will do much to dispel rumors.
4. If you prepare a communication to parents, briefly describe the incident and focus on what was done to immediately address the situation and underscore that student safety always comes first on your campus.
5. Note in any communication that, for the most part, campuses are very safe locations for students and staff. A school site, however, is a microcosm of our community and, unfortunately, from time-to-time, wrongful acts take place.

*What you can do:*

1. Describe the incident as you know it - without assigning blame on naming individuals.
2. If injuries occurred say so, if you are asked - but do not speculate as to the severity of these injuries, unless this information is communicated to you by a medical expert who is qualified to evaluate injuries, then cite your source.
3. If property was damaged, explain the damage, but try to refrain from giving an amount of damage unless you know the replacement costs. Then put it in terms of replacement costs.
4. Explain any disciplinary action if law enforcement is not involved. If law enforcement is involved, defer to law enforcement and limit your response to explaining what the school's policy is for this type of action.
5. Underscore that student and staff safety is your highest concern. Convey your concern to parents.
6. Talk about your school's zero tolerance policy related to possession of weapons or other violent acts on campus, if that is appropriate to the situation.

*What you cannot do:*

1. Do not accuse anyone by name. If law enforcement elects to do so, so be it.
2. Do not release the student's or staff member's home address, phone number or provide any information that will help the media contact the students, their parents or a staff member. This is not our role, and doing so can create legal problems.
3. Do not speculate on the motivation or cause that led to the incident. Leave this to law enforcement.

*If local law enforcement determines the violence that took place on campus does create a crime scene, media access can be restricted. This option is open only to law enforcement.*

## ► FIRE OR NATURAL DISASTER

A fire or natural disaster will involve agencies from outside the school site. Your role as a communicator is not to report on causes, suspects or other specifics of the fire or natural disaster that experts or officials within these agencies regularly handle unless you are asked to do so.

*The role of school communicators should include:*

1. Assurances that student safety comes first, confirming that all efforts are being undertaken to minimize student injury (Be sure to check with your school's emergency plan.) And keep students safe.
2. If student injuries are involved, make certain parents are notified and told what was or is being done to provide treatment. Always try to get parents notified before they learn about student injuries in the media. This, however, is not always possible, but parents should be notified as quickly as possible.
3. If students were moved off campus to another location, be sure to report this and again, emphasize that they will be supervised until parents or guardians can be notified or can pick them up.

Never dismiss students into a situation that may jeopardize their safety, even if it requires keeping them in the school overnight in the event their parents cannot be reached or are unable to reach your school site.

## ► EMPLOYEE, STUDENT ACCUSED OF SALE, POSSESSION OF ILLEGAL SUBSTANCE

There are situations when law enforcement may arrest a staff member or student for sale of an illegal substance or weapon on the school campus. While details of the arrests or investigation specifics should be left to law enforcement, this does not mean the school will not receive media scrutiny and questions.

It is quite appropriate for the media to ask if the school learned of the situation and called law enforcement. It is common for the news media to ask about the student or staff members record at school.

*What you can release:*

1. You can confirm, if law enforcement publicly releases a name to the media that the accused or suspected staff member is assigned to your campus. You may also release how long an accused staff member has worked for your school district and their job duties. If the staff member is on administrative leave with pay, you may also confirm that information.
2. In the case of a student, you can confirm that they attend your school and that is all. If they were an outstanding student connected with athletics or academic achievement, you can confirm that, if asked, but don't volunteer this information.

*Never dismiss students into a situation that may jeopardize their safety, even if it requires keeping them in the school overnight in the event their parents cannot be reached or are unable to reach your school.*

*What you cannot release:*

1. A staff member's personnel record-only name, job assignment, and job duties. Consult with legal counsel if further information is requested.
2. You cannot release the student's name. You can only confirm it, if the media asks you if that student attends your school district.
3. Do not speculate about the student or staff member's guilt or innocence or any aspects of the investigation.
4. If a student is accused, make no reference to whether the student is or is not on campus. You may want to quote from the schools discipline code about what action it takes to remove a student when they are accused of various offenses.
5. If the opportunity surfaces, explain to the media the school's no tolerance policy for illegal substances and weapons. You might also point out preventative educational programs you operate for students, along with help you try to provide students who voluntarily come to you requesting assistance. Underscore that this is a community program and not limited to the campus. Also note schools and communities tackle problems best when they work cooperatively.

*If the opportunity surfaces, explain to the media the school's no tolerance policy for illegal substances and weapons.*

## ► ALTERNATIVES TO “NO COMMENT”

*In response to an issue you aren't yet prepared to talk about:* “The specifics to this issue aren't yet available” or “The matter is still under review—no decision has been reached.”

*In response to an issue you are not involved in:* “I'm not privy to that information.” or “I don't know anything about that matter.” or “I'm not the person you should be talking to about this issue. Let me give you the name of that person.”

*In response to ongoing contract negotiations:* “We aren't in a position to release that information at this time. We hope to have it ready by (date).”

*In response to an employee dismissal, discipline, etc.:* “Federal and state laws regarding employee confidentiality do not allow me to release this information.”

*In response to an item where no decision has been reached:* “We are continuing to review our options on this matter and when we make a decision (or recommendation) we will share it with you.”

*In response to union charges that the bad faith negotiations are taking place:* “That is their (union's) statement, not our's (or the district's).” or “We're sorry to hear that they (the union) take this position. Had that been our intention, we wouldn't be investing much time trying to reach a settlement satisfactory to all parties.”

*In response to union allegations that negotiations have reached an impasse but no statement to this effect has been made by the district:* “That's not the position of the board of education at this time.”

*In response to union charges of employee harassment:* “They (the union) are free to say anything they desire. Our position is to devote our energies toward more productive pursuits.”

*In response to union charges during a strike that the district has hired scabs or replacements:* “Talk is cheap. The fact and reality of the situation is that, as educators and parents, we have an obligation to do everything in our power to continue the education of our students. That's what parents and taxpayers expect and demand from us and that's what we're doing.”

*In response to allegations of child endangerment, molestation, etc.:* “We take any allegation or accusation of this nature very seriously. The matter is receiving a complete and immediate review. Law enforcement has been (or is being) notified. Our goal first and foremost always is the safety and welfare of the students.”

*Your views as an administrator on efforts to recall one or more members of your school's board:* “That's an issue for voters to decide.” or “My role and duty is to educate students, not to comment on matters that will be decided at the ballot box.”

*In response to the death of a student on or off the campus:* “We are like a family here. He or she will be deeply missed. We are devoting considerable effort to help our students adjust to this tragedy. We extend our sincere sympathies to the family.”

*In response to the dismissal of a superintendent or other high level district official:* “At its meeting of \_\_\_\_\_, the \_\_\_\_\_ district board of trustees elected (or voted) to release \_\_\_\_\_ or accept the resignation of \_\_\_\_\_. If you would like more information, I suggest you contact the board president.”

*And if you're then asked if you enjoyed working with the individual just dismissed and if you miss that individual, say:* “During the \_\_\_\_\_ years I worked with (name), our relationship was candid and professional.”

*Never say  
“No comment.”  
It sounds as if  
you're hiding  
something.  
If necessary,  
explain why it is  
not appropriate  
or impossible for  
you to answer  
the question.*

## ► **WHAT TO DO IF THE MEDIA SHOWS UP UNEXPECTEDLY**

1. Introduce yourself to reporter and photographer (*who is responsible for 87 percent of the story*)
2. Ask the reporting team what story they are working on
3. Locate the cameraperson and indicate where you would like to do the interview.
4. Buy time — invite the cameraperson to get set up and ask the crew to excuse you for a few minutes as you have a matter to take care of (phone call you were on, meeting you were in, etc.) and promise to be right back. Use the time to gather key staff for fact finding and to formulate a response.
5. Get PUMPED UP for the event - use facial exercises.
6. Pre-Interview — give the reporter a short, one page fact sheet, if you have time to prepare one.
7. Prior to the camera rolling slip into conversation with the reporter, “You know, (reporter’s name), the most asked question I get is...”
8. Ask the cameraperson if he/she needs B-roll.

## ► **DURING A CRISIS INTERVIEW...**

1. Tell the truth
2. Give the reporter all the information they could get from another source
3. Don't respond TO the media...respond THROUGH the media
4. Humanizing the district during a crisis is paramount
5. Think of doing an interview as a performing art
6. LEAD WITH COMPASSION FIRST — the audience doesn't care how much you know UNTIL they know how much you care
7. Lighten up your face
8. Use shorter sentences
9. Don't stop performing even when they are shooting B-roll  
Listen with your face — there is a big gap between interest and compassion
10. ALL THE MEDIA WANTS IS A COLORFUL SOUNDBITE  
Use the 15 second sound bite rule

*Lead with  
compassion first.  
The audience  
doesn't care how  
much you know,  
until they know  
how much  
you care.*

## ► MASTER THE 15 SECOND SOUND BITE

1. **First Five Seconds** - Lead with compassion or understanding over the question asked.
2. **Next Five Seconds** - Use the reporter's name and good news information about what the district/school does better than anyone else.
3. **Last Five Seconds** - Use an illustration or solution to supplement the good news.

### EXAMPLES:

#### **Horrible Automobile Accident**

*(1) We do not know yet what caused the accident, (2) Gloria, but certainly, we have great sorrow for those who were injured and their families, (3) and we will do all that we can to help ease their sorrow and suffering.*

#### **Bad Test Scores**

*(1) We know the test results were not what we had hoped for, (2) Jerry, but the gains we have made over where we were two years ago are encouraging. (3) We have dedicated teachers and staff that won't be satisfied until we reach our goal.*

#### **Tainted Well Water**

*(1) We are distressed to learn of the EPA's findings, (2) Irving, but that is why we constantly monitor our wells — to make sure the water is safe, (3) and we have a contingency plan in place to provide bottled water to all students, until the water is once again safe to drink.*

#### **Student Revolt**

*(1) What happened on the campus this morning was regrettable, (2) Charlie, but our district maintains a zero tolerance policy when it comes to violence, (3) and the students responsible for this act will be held accountable for their actions, as we seek to keep our schools the safest place for our children.*

*All the media wants is a colorful sound bite. Use the 15 second sound bite rule.*