

TIPS FOR CONDUCTING MEDIA INTERVIEWS

Today, reporters are writing more stories related to schools and education than they have in the past. As a “front burner issue,” education is a topic that parents and taxpayers are eager to know more about. While the topic usually revolves around the students, more often than not the principal of the school will be contacted and interviewed for the story.

Following are some tips to keep in mind if you are contacted for a media interview.

Before the Interview Takes Place

- Call your board Communications department to let them know you have been asked to conduct the interview. Find out if there are any outstanding issues about the topic or the reporter that you need to know about. Confirm that you have the authority to conduct the interview.
- Know who will be interviewing you – name of reporter; media outlet; type of publication (daily/weekly/journal/Cable TV station etc.).
- Clarify where the interview will be taking place and at what time. If the interview will be conducted over the phone, confirm whether the reporter will be calling you, or vice versa.
- If the reporter will be calling you, make sure you are in your office or easily accessible 10 minutes prior to the call. Ensure the office staff know to put the call through to you when it comes in.
- If possible, track down previous stories written by the reporter to get an idea of the kinds of questions that might be asked or the style of reporting. Use a Google search or check with your board’s Communications department.
- Find out exactly what the reporter wants to talk to you about. Agree to talk about that – and only that – topic (for example, school safety).
- Prepare a few messages that you can use to answer questions. Think about what you would like the readers or viewers to know about this topic or situation.
- Have some supporting statements on hand to underline your messages, such as school policies, sections of pertinent legislation, statistics, poll results, comments from parents, test scores etc.
- Rehearse by having a colleague ask you a few questions about the topic. This will help you to practice the wording you want to use during the interview. It may also raise some questions that you have not thought of.

During the Interview

- Stick to your messages and to the topic agreed upon. If the reporter tries to steer the interview in another direction, let them know that you can talk about that topic another day, but that today you agreed to talk about school safety.
- Listen closely to the questions being asked. Do not interrupt or start answering the question until the reporter has finished asking it.
- If you don’t understand what the reporter is asking you, ask him/her to clarify his/her question.

- If the questions contains misleading or inaccurate statements, begin your answer by correcting the record.
- Use the supporting statements you have prepared to back up your key points.
- Avoid acronyms and jargon that may be common to you, but may be misunderstood or misinterpreted by a reporter.
- Keep your answers short and succinct.
- Stay calm, even if the reporter tries to put you on the defensive.
- Always talk about education and students. This should be the main point of any interview with a principal.
- Remember there really is no “off the record.” Do not say anything during the interview that you wouldn’t be comfortable seeing in the story.
- Don’t repeat negative language used by the reporter. Answer questions in your own words.
- If you don’t know the answer to a question, tell the reporter you will find out and get back to them – and then do it! Don’t guess or speculate.

After the Interview

- Get a copy of the story (photocopy it if it is a print story or obtain a transcript if it is a TV or radio story). Transcripts can either be obtained by the news outlet or through a media monitoring service. Your board Communications department may be able to help with this.
- Make copies of the story and include it with your next home mailing or newsletter.
- If it is a good news story, send a copy to your key contact list and share it at your next School Council meeting.
- If you feel the story was fair and accurate, call the reporter and thank him/her for the opportunity to be part of the story.