**Responding to the Media**

**Protocol for Responding to Media Inquiries**

*Remember Your ABCs*

**ACKNOWLEDGE** the reporter and his/her inquiry. **BRIDGE** the reporter over to CCCOE Communications. **CLEAR** all release of information (even that which is pro-active and positive) with CCCOE Communications to ensure accurate and effective **COMMUNICATION**.

*Additional tips:*

**Hand off.** Referring media inquiries to the Communications Office is an accepted industry practice. Don’t feel you have to apologize. Sample language is shown to help you “bridge” reporters to Communications.

**Mind your manners.** Be courteous. Be friendly. But also remember that just as you are on the job, so is the reporter. The reporter, no matter how congenial or affirming, is a colleague in the world of work, doing the work he or she is paid to do. Reporters have three objectives in an interview: facts, context, and quotes. Everything you say and do – including body language, offhand jokes, and so on – may be observed and reported on by the media representative, who is simply looking for ways to do his/her best job: To make the story “come alive” for the audience. Be aware.

**Don’t fall for traps.** The common “bait” put before unsuspecting persons to encourage an immediate (and not always appropriate) response. These tactics are not media-exclusive, but universal in the business world. Be watchful for:

- Phony friendliness or support
- Unfair comparisons or hostile remarks
- Negativelyphrased questions
- Implied approval from higher-ups for you to comment
- Speculation and “what ifs”
- Silence
- False assumptions or outrageous charges

**Don’t educate.** The reporter’s job is similar to that of a building contractor. He or she is expected to construct something whole and complete using a variety of resources and tools. CCCOE’s input to a story is usually just one corner of the foundation, or perhaps one of the timbers. Don’t offer to teach the reporter everything about an issue; you run the

*Three Risks of Being MISsed:*

1. Unintentionally MISleading/MISinforming the reporter.

2. MISunderstanding the questions asked of you (this often occurs when you speak outside your area of expertise or authority).

3. Being MISunderstood by the reporter.
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It is the responsibility of the Communications Director to interpret the reporter’s needs and to connect the reporter to the appropriate CCCOE or community resource. Wait for instruction from Communications or your administrator before providing information to a media representative.

Be prepared. Be familiar with CCCOE procedures and policies relating to emergency situations (natural disasters, accidents, criminal incidents, etc.) Your administrator, upon notification of the emergency from you, will immediately inform Communications of the situation so that media, parent and public inquiries may be handled in an expedient and appropriate manner.

Responding to Phone Inquiries

1. Ask for reporter’s name/title/news outlet (Channel 3, Contra Costa Times, etc.). Ask what kind of deadline the reporter has (3 p.m. today? Next Tuesday?) Find out what it is the reporter wants to know. Obtain a phone number and/or pager number at which the reporter can be reached. Repeat this information back to the reporter to ensure its accuracy.

2. Bridge! Here are some sentences which are proven to work:

   “I have a parent in my office at the moment. May I call you right back?”

   “It may take time to get the information you need. Give me the best number to reach you at later today.”

   “You’re on deadline? Then you’ll want to talk with someone right away. Let me have your number and I’ll have our communications director call you right back.”

   “You’ll need to speak with someone who can give you some background on this. Here’s the number of our CCCOE communications director; she’ll help locate the information you need.”

   “Our procedure is that we clear all interviews beforehand. Would you like to call our communications director, or would you prefer that I have her call you instead?”

3. Call Peggy Marshburn at 925/942-3420. If you get voice mail, leave a message detailing the information you gathered in step 1 above. If an immediate response is needed, make sure the number you leave is a phone number at which you can be reached in the next 10 minutes. You can also call Peggy on her cell phone at 925/766-7575. Depending on the situation, she may first consult with Superintendent Joseph Ovick, Deputy Superintendent Ellen Elster, Associate Superintendents Ray Penning or Susan Magone, or Assistant Superintendent Mike Bowers for recommendation of appropriate response and handling.
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4. You’ll receive a call back from Peggy or your administrator telling you what action/response is being taken. If you get further calls from the reporter, do not assume you can go ahead and speak unless you have specifically heard back from Peggy or your administrator.

5. Subsequent calls, whether from the same reporter on this or a different matter – OR from a different reporter on the SAME matter – all need to be handled as if “new.” Start all over again (steps 1-4).

**When the Media Show Up Unannounced**

If the reporter checks in at the front office:

“Please come with me to my office and you can tell me what it is you need.”

1. Take person to private office or conference room away from students.

2. Ask for business card or name/title/news outlet. Also find out the purpose of the visit (the nature of the reporter's story).

3. Bridge! Offer coffee, ask reporter to wait while you get CCCOE administration on the phone, make a name badge for him/her, have him/her “sign in” as a visitor, give reporter something education related to read: your school brochure, CCCOE publication, etc.

4. From another room, call Peggy Marshburn for direction. It’s best to not offer a tour, to answer questions, or to allow photos to be taken while waiting for Peggy’s response. Busy yourself elsewhere (preferably out of sight). Ask a staff member to keep an eye on your guest so s/he doesn’t wander around.

5. Peggy will immediately consult with a member of the CCCOE administration team and supply direction to you.
**RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA**

If you see a reporter drive up or persons being interviewed on your campus, say:

“California law requires that all visitors to the school site check in first at the front office. I'll have to ask you to come with me now so that we can take care of that.”

Follow steps 1-5.

If a reporter refuses to cooperate (sometimes s/he'll demand First Amendment rights), you could say:

“As principal of this school, I have a responsibility to safeguard the privacy of my students and to ensure their safety while they are here. I believe you are causing a disruption on this campus. Causing a disruption or creating an interference with classes or other activities of a public school program is in violation of Education Code Section 32210. I have a right to ask that you leave the campus now.”

Follow steps 1-5.

If you still encounter refusal, you could say:

“Failing to leave a public school building or public school grounds promptly upon request of the principal or designee is in violation of California law. This is a misdemeanor under Section 626.8 of the Penal Code.”

Get whatever identifying information you can (name, media outlet, what the reporter wants) and follow steps 4-5. Discreetly cancel any impending recess or passing period to avoid causing further disruption on the campus and to decrease opportunity for student-media interaction; this is particularly important when a TV crew is present. Do not harass, threaten or touch a reporter. Accompany the reporter at all times. Document the reporter's actions in writing until the arrival of a CCCOE administrator and/or the CCCOE communications director.
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**Media Access Rights in California**

- News media have almost blanket rights to come into schools under the Constitution and state laws.
- Penal Code allows banning outsiders from campus, but specifically exempts reporters.
- Education Code says you may exclude the media if they are “disrupting normal educational operations.”
- Always escort media while on campus.
- Photo releases are not needed for “news,” but are required under any circumstances for specified student populations. Don’t take any chances; call Communications for direction and a photo/Web release form.
- Under the Freedom of Information Act, we may be required to supply media “public record” information about the student or staff member, such as access to yearbook photos. Media should be urged to get in touch with family for photos.
- Ask that media representatives sign in first at the school office.
- Issue “press badges” or passes to ensure first point of contact and to identify reporters.
- A “command center” approach will help contain a crisis situation and improve communications with media.
- Police may exclude/restrict access by the media at a crime scene or a natural disaster.
**Anatomy of a News Release**

You have about five seconds to get an editor’s attention and 15 seconds to persuade them that what you have to say is important enough to be on the assignment schedule.

A. The release isn’t the story! It just gets them to call you about the story.

B. Remember the distinction between print and electronic news media.

C. Always date the release. Embargoes rarely work and may hurt you. Once it’s out, it’s out!

D. Don’t forget a school contact name and phone numbers, including after hours.

E. One sided, limit to two pages, double space typed.

F. Leave room at top or sides for notes. They write on the release.

G. Be brief, no jargon, give full names and titles, small paragraphs.

H. Avoid adjectives.

I. Use a headline, not just “News Release.” Make sure that your school/agency name is the most prominent at the top of the page. They get thousands of pieces of paper labeled “News Release.”

J. Play “what’s my Line?” by using the five Ws and 1 H (Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How.)

K. Keep the clips to see how you got covered. Learn from your mistakes and check their style.

L. KISS: Keep It Short and Simple.

M. Mailing it isn't enough. Try the FAX and above all, follow with a call. It’s best if it goes to a specific person by name. Keep your contact list updated.

N. Make sure that you send the release both to the education reporters and the assignment or news editors.

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*Courtesy Tom DeLapp, Communication Resources for Schools*
The Basics of News Media Relations in an Emergency/Crisis Situation

Be First. Be Right. Be Credible.

Build Trust and Credibility by Expressing:
- Empathy and caring
- Competence and expertise
- Honesty and openness
- Commitment and dedication

Top Tips:
- Don’t over reassure
- Acknowledge uncertainty
- Express wishes (“I wish I had answers”)
- Explain the process in place to find answers
- Acknowledge people’s fear

As a spokesperson:
- Know your organization’s policies
- Stay within the scope of your responsibilities
- Don’t answer questions that are not within the scope of your organizational responsibility
- Tell the truth. Be transparent
- Embody your agency’s identity

Pitfalls for spokespersons:
- Remember that jargon complicates communication and implies arrogance
- Use humor cautiously or not at all
- Refute negative allegations without repeating them
- Use positive or neutral terms
- Don’t assume you’ve made your point. Ask
- At all costs, avoid one-liners, clichés, and off-the-cuff comments
- Discuss what you know, not what you think
- Do not express personal opinions
- Don’t show off

What spokespersons should know when talking through the media:
- Your job is not their job, respect the differences, look for the mutual goals.
- Go into any media interview with a purpose. Have a message to deliver. If you don’t, you don’t have a reason to do the interview.
- Make sure the reporter gets your name and title right, as well as that of other COE personnel.
General media interview pitfalls:

- Don’t let a reporter put words in your mouth. The reporter may use inflammatory or emotionally laden words. Don’t repeat them.

- If the question contains leading or loaded language, reframe the question to eliminate the language and then answer the question.

- Don’t assume the reporter has it right if he or she claims that someone has lodged an allegation. Don’t react to new information a reporter gives you. Instead, say, “I have not heard that” or “I would have to verify that before I could respond.” Don’t let the reporter start a fight.

- If a reporter leaves a microphone in your face after you’ve answered the question, stop. Do not answer the question again or add to your answer. Instead, say, “That was my answer. Do you have another question for me to address?” Say it matter of factly, without sarcasm or annoyance.

- There is no such thing as “off the record.” Background and deep background do not mean you won’t be quoted. Do not say anything before, during, or at the conclusion of an interview that you are not prepared to see in print the next day. The interview hasn’t ended until the reporter and all equipment is out the door and long gone.

- Anticipate questions. Work with your communications director or administrator to anticipate as many expected questions as possible and draft the answers. Nuances count. A word change here or there may make the difference in how well your answer is received. Put the answer on paper (it will usually be too long to give in public) and then find the bottom line – what is the point you want to make? What rings true and doesn’t sound evasive? That’s your 30-second answer.

- Make your point first. Have prepared message points. Try to say it in 30 seconds and in fewer than 90 words.

- Don’t fake it. If you don’t know the answer, say so. If it’s not in your area of expertise, say so. Commit to getting the answer.

- Never speak disparagingly of anyone, not even in jest. Don’t assign blame or pass the buck. Stick to what you know and what your organization is doing. Don’t fight your battles through the media. If you don’t have something nice to say, don’t say anything. Remind reporters that professionals can differ in opinion but that does not mean they should attack each other in the media.

- Don’t buy in to hypothetical questions. Reframe the question in a way that addresses legitimate concerns of the public without being sensational or “entertainment.”

- Record sensitive interviews. Be sure the reporter knows you are doing it.
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- Do not ask reporters to review their articles or interviews. Offer to clarify information for them as they prepare their piece. If a reporter shows you the piece, understand that he or she expects you to correct errors in fact – not viewpoints that may differ from yours.
- Break down multiple-part questions and answer each part separately.
- Don’t raise issues you don’t want to see in print or on the news.
- Don’t say “No comment” to a reporter’s question. Instead, state why you can’t answer that question. Say that the matter is under investigation, the organization has not yet made a decision, or simply that you are not the appropriate person to answer that question.

Media opportunity or press conference tips:
- Determine in advance who will answer questions about specific subject matters.
- Keep answers short and focused – no longer than two minutes.
- Assume every mic is live – all the time.

In-person interview tips:
- Know who will be conducting the interview.
- Know the subjects the reporter wants to cover and limit the interview to those subjects.
- Caution the reporter when you are not the right person to answer a question.
- Know the format and duration of the interview. You can set limits.
- Ask who else will be interviewed or has been interviewed.

DO NOT:
- Embarrass or argue with a reporter.
- Tell the news organization which reporter you prefer.
- Demand that your remarks not be edited.
- Insist that an adversary not be interviewed.
- Lie or cloud the truth.
- Demand that an answer you’ve given not be used.
- State that what you are about to say is off the record or not attributable to you.
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Telephone interview tips:

- Know who is on the other end of the line.
- Ask if you are being recorded.
- Ask when and where the information will be used.
- Obtain the reporter’s phone number before the interview begins. You may need to call back if the call is interrupted or if you need to provide updated information.
- Spell out difficult names/technical terms/phrases.

At the outset, limit the time available for the interview. Give yourself an out, such as a pending meeting. You have an obligation to answer important questions from the media, but you do not have an obligation to explore every facet of the incident or to do reporters’ homework. Send them to Web-based or print materials to save time. Be certain to ask reporters for feedback to ensure that they understand your points.

- Go to a quiet room.
- Don’t allow distractions.
- Stand up. It strengthens your voice and makes you alert.

Keep key messages at hand. Repeat them often so reporters know these are what you believe are important.

Reporters are not adversaries. They are also not your friends. Some reporters will use well-known techniques to attempt to get a reaction from you. Adjust your interview style accordingly.

- Sensational or unrelated questions: Answer the question in as few words as possible without repeating the sensational elements. Then return to your key messages. Here are a few recommended “bridges” back to what you want to say:
  - “What I think you are really asking is…”
  - “The overall issue is…”
  - “What’s important to remember is…”
  - “It’s our policy to not discuss this issue, but what I can tell you is…”
  - “What I’m really here to discuss…”
  - “Your readers/viewers need to know…”
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- **Character attack**: Don’t lock horns with an adversary during an interview. Do question the science, issues, or goals, but not someone’s character. “I can’t speak for Dr. X. You’ll have to ask him or her, but what I can address is…”

- **Machine-gun questioning**: Reporter fires rapid questions at you. Pacing is quick. Reporter interrupts your response. You respond, “Please let me answer this question.” Control the pace. Take time to think.

- **Mic Feeding and pausing**: You’ve given a good answer on a controversial issue. The reporter pauses and the camera continues to roll. Stay on your agenda. Be aware of nonverbal cues (deer in the headlight look, fidgeting). Don’t sweat. It’s the reporter’s job to fill the air time. Dead air doesn’t make scintillating viewing – unless you’re reacting nonverbally. Relax.

- **Hot mic**: It’s always on. Always – including during “testing.”

- **Sensational question with an A or B dilemma**: Use positive words, correct the inaccuracies without repeating the negative, and reject A or B as neither are valid. Explain, “There’s actually another alternative you may not have considered,” and give your message point.

- **Surprise prop**: The reporter attempts to hand you a report or supposedly contaminated item. Don’t take it. If you take it, you own it. React by saying, “I’m familiar with that report, and what I can say is” or “I’m not familiar with that report, but what is important is,” and then go to your key message.

**Stay on message:**

- “What’s important is to remember…”
- “I can’t answer that question, but I can tell you…”
- “Before I forget, I want to tell your viewers…”
- “Let me put that in perspective…”

The quickest way to publicly fall flat on your face as an organization is to not be able to release accurate information quickly.

Spokespersons don’t just read a statement; they are the statement.

The spokesperson brings the organization to life. They literally embody the organization and give it its human identity. A spokesperson takes the organization from an “it” to a “we,” and is the conduit to various audiences so that the organization does not have to rely entirely on the written word.

A spokesperson must be perceived as trustworthy and credible. Research indicates that being perceived as empathetic and caring provides greater opportunity for your message to be received and acted upon. Express empathy or caring within the first 30 seconds. Besides empathy, credibility is built on expressions of competence and expertise (truly “knowing your stuff”), honesty and openness, and commitment and dedication.

*Courtesy of: Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*