

We, the Media

Working with the media and communicating with the public through the media are part and parcel of a public official's job—state board members included. It is a reciprocal relationship: Reporters depend on board members to be authoritative sources about state education matters. Board members in turn need the media to help relay important decisions and build public trust. Relationships with media are especially important as states finalize their accountability plans under the Every Student Succeeds Act and gear up for implementation.

Yet newsrooms are increasingly short staffed. As a result, reporters covering the state board of education may be working on multiple beats at once, and they are often younger or less experienced. This inexperience can be both a challenge and an opportunity for state boards. In responding to press inquiries, board members can educate reporters new to the beat on the intricacies of education policymaking while answering their specific questions.

Getting to know editorial boards and writers from your state's newspaper of record is also key, as op-ed pages affect and reflect public perceptions.

Reporters will ask difficult but usually fair questions. These 10 tips can help get you ready:

- 1. Ask yourself, "Am I the appropriate spokesperson?"** Many state boards choose only one board member to serve as spokesperson or have rules on member interactions with the media. Before agreeing to an interview, be clear about your board's policy.
- 2. Be responsive.** Reporters operate on deadlines, so timeliness is of the essence. Always ask when the deadline is and meet or beat it.
- 3. Check out the interviewer.** Knowing what your interviewer has written or their point of view can help in building rapport.
- 4. Be prepared.** A successful interview depends on your knowing the issue being covered. Read up and outline key points, messages, and facts you want to cover. Anticipate questions and compile talking points.
- 5. Be concise.** It's easy to say more than you mean to. Keep answers short, relevant, and jargon-free.
- 6. Accuracy and honesty are critical.** Never under any circumstances lie to a reporter. If you are caught in a lie, that will be the news. It is okay to refer a reporter to another expert or ask to double check a fact before you are quoted.
- 7. There is no such thing as "off the record."** Always assume that whatever you say will be used and attributed—even if your interview is "on background." It is easy for a reporter to misread her notes or decide that something you said is too good to omit.
- 8. Watch out for leading questions and hypotheticals.** Reporters may try to put words in your mouth or set up a quote they need. Avoid the temptation to "fill the silence" or speak out of turn.
- 9. Keep your cool.** Sometimes an interview elicits unexpected emotions. Breathe deeply and keep your tone, pace, and facial expressions even.
- 10. Repeat your main points.** At the end of every interview, slowly repeat two or three important points. You want to make sure the reporter has recorded—and understands—the most salient facts. ■



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