

Boardsmanship Review

Working with the Media

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Regardless of whether you are an appointed or elected member of your state board, your role as a state policymaker opens you up to scrutiny from parents, community leaders, and the news media.

Working with the media and communicating with the public through the media are essential to a board member's role as a public official. Reporters depend on board members to be authoritative sources of information about state education matters, and they pay close attention to board proceedings. In turn, board members can work with the media to help communicate important decisions to stakeholders and build public trust. This Boardsmanship Review outlines ways state board members can effectively interact with the media.

TYPES OF NEWS MEDIA

Although a growing number of people, and particularly young people, get their news from social media and other nontraditional online media sources such as blogs, most still depend on traditional media sources for their news: newspapers, magazines, television, and radio.

BOX 1. WHAT MAKES NEWS?

You know the old saw: "Dog bites man. Not news. Man bites dog. That's news." What excites the news media are stories of rarity, conflict, and drama. When your board moves to change policy in a drastic way, it makes news. When it makes a decision that conflicts with a legislative decision or when it can't agree to make any decision, it makes news. An ethical misstep by a member makes news. As your state board conducts its business, be mindful of agenda items that will pique a reporter's interest and be prepared to answer their calls.

A reporter's job is to report news and information accurately and quickly. Reporters are often assigned "beats," or issues to cover, including politics and education. But as data from the Pew Research Center suggests, newsrooms are increasingly short-staffed. The number of full-time reporters covering state legislatures for daily newspapers declined by 35 percent between 2003 and 2014, and less than one-third of the 801 daily newspapers in the United States send a reporter to cover state capital news. Likewise, just 14 percent of TV stations have an assigned state reporter, and only 124 reporters cover state houses on radio.

One-third of education beat reporters say their newsroom has shrunk in recent years, according to the Education Writers Association. Because of this, reporters covering the state board of education may be working on multiple beats at once, and they are likely to be younger and less experienced.

This inexperience can be both a challenge and an opportunity for state board members. In responding to press inquiries on board decisions, board members can educate reporters new to the beat on the intricacies of education policy-making while answering their specific questions.

Board members can expect both print and online-only newspapers and local TV and radio to report on state board decisions (box 1). Newspaper reporters often have more time to spend on a story and will call for a quote or background, or they may want to confirm a detail about a board decision for a story the next day. Broadcast reporters are likely working on a story for later that day and must distill the same content into a short clip, sometimes only a minute or two long. Concise, complete statements are important for TV or radio interviews, and board members can expect that some of these interviews will be recorded live.

State boards should also consider getting to know the editorial boards and writers from their state's newspaper of record. Newspaper editorials can both affect and reflect public perceptions of an issue. It is in the state board's best interest to develop a rapport with editorial writers before they weigh in on education matters.

BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESS INTERVIEWS

Speaking to reporters can be nerve-wracking, especially if you've never done a press interview before. They will ask difficult questions and sometimes ones meant to throw you off guard. Remember though, they are only doing their jobs. For any press interview, it is important to stay calm and follow these 10 tips:

- 1. Ask yourself, "Am I the appropriate spokesperson?"** Many boards choose to have only one member serve as spokesperson or have rules on member interactions with the media (box 2). Before agreeing to an interview, be clear about what your board's policy is on talking with the press. In cases when you are contacted by reporters but are not the appropriate person to answer their questions, refer them to the appropriate spokesperson or suggest someone else with more expertise on an issue. Reporters will appreciate the tip.
- 2. Be responsive.** Reporters operate on deadlines, so timeliness is of the utmost importance. Reporters remember who is responsive and who is not, so when they call, always ask

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BOX 2. STATE BOARD PRESS POLICIES

State boards of education have thought carefully about how members should interact with the press. All of the 24 boards that responded to NASBE's request for information have either a formal or informal press policy or are developing such a policy. Nearly half of them have a written press policy in their bylaws or other board documents.

About two-thirds of the boards designate a specific person—usually the chair or president, communications director, or executive director—to speak on behalf of the entire board. When that person is unavailable, a few states designate another board member or staff member as spokesperson.

Most of the boards allow members to share their own views with the press, but at least half ask members to provide a disclaimer that they are offering their own opinions and do not represent the entire board, just as Nebraska has done in its policy:

Board members have the responsibility to make it clear when they are speaking or writing on their own behalf that they are not representing the Board. Board members should add a disclaimer to written and electronic communication indicating that their statements represent the Board member's personal views and not those of the State Board of Education. When directed by the full Board, or as directed by Board President, they may speak on behalf of the Board.

But having a media policy is only the first step. It is critical that members work together to articulate and find agreement on clear, cohesive messages that help the public make sense of board decisions. Members should always leverage the expertise of their executive director and/or communications team to craft a messaging plan that accurately reflects the board's vision for education and consult them with them on any press inquiries.

when their deadline is and meet or beat it.

3. Prepare, prepare, prepare. A successful interview depends on how well you know the issue being covered. Before agreeing to be interviewed, ask the reporter what they want to speak with you about. Read up on the issue and outline the key points, messages, and facts that you want to make sure you cover during the interview—regardless of what questions you are asked. Try to anticipate their questions. If you are doing a phone interview, write out important data points you may be asked about and have your talking points handy to help you stay on message. If time allows, review your notes and practice with a colleague or communications staff member beforehand.

4. Check out the interviewer. It's important to research reporters who will be interviewing you. What have they written about recently? Do their stories tend to have a particular angle or point of view? How long have they covered education? Knowing these details can help build rapport with a journalist.

5. Be concise. It's easy to get tripped up by an interview question and say more than you mean to. Before you give a response, ask yourself: "What is the essential information?" Keep your answers short and relevant. Do not use jargon, acronyms, or wonky terms. If you want to drive home a point or key message, be explicit. "The bottom line is...."

6. Accuracy and honesty are critical. Never under any circumstances lie to a reporter. Relationships with the press are built on trust, and every effort should be made to ensure your words are accurate and truthful. If you are caught in a lie, that will be the news. Avoid responding to questions with "no comment," as it can sound like you have something to hide. Instead, if you don't know an answer to a question, say "I don't know." Refer them to another expert, or tell them that you'd like to double check the information before being quoted on it.

7. There is no such thing as "off the record." It is always safest to assume that whatever you say during an interview with a

reporter will be used in her story 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 not to include. If you are being interviewed in person at your office, clear your desk of any sensitive information. For TV or radio, always assume your microphone is "hot" to avoid stray comments.

8. Watch out for leading questions and hypotheticals. "Wouldn't you say that...." Reporters often try to put words in people's mouths to get them to share insider information. Or they may have already written the story and are trying to set up a quote they need to fill a gap. Avoid the temptation to fill the silence or speak out of turn. Stick to the facts and your talking points.

9. Keep your cool. Sometimes the excitement of an interview brings about unplanned emotions. You may get frustrated by a question. Take a deep breath and try to stay calm. Be mindful of how fast you are talking and your tone. If you are conducting an interview in person, be aware of your posture and facial expressions.

10. Repeat your main points. At the end of every interview, slowly go through your two or three most important points. You want to make sure the reporter has recorded or written—and understands—the most salient facts. You might say, "I just want to make sure you got these three essential points...." And always make the sure the reporter has a phone number where you can be reached for additional information on deadline.

CONCLUSION

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) prioritizes ongoing stakeholder engagement throughout the state planning process and implementation. The news media are not specifically called out in ESSA, but journalists have the power to influence your most important stakeholders. Having a strong relationship with the media can increase public awareness of and support for your board's policymaking.

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