



Media Relations

Never underestimate the power of the press! Telling your school's story is essential to building strong support for your public schools.

Sometimes educating our political leaders isn't enough. When others are putting out misinformation (stuff that's just plain wrong), it becomes necessary to stem the tide of anti-public school sentiment by contacting the media.

Media coverage is also a great way to get the attention of your elected officials. Policymakers are often influenced by local media reports.

People tend to think of "media spokespersons" as well-trained, experts on the issues. What they forget is the importance of local stories.

You can help the public be informed by telling the stories about how the issues are impacting your children and your schools. A big piece of this story is about how little local control your schools and community now have over the decisions being made that impact your schools.

Times have changed, and many people don't know it. Many think school budgets are still set by local school

boards and paid for through local property taxes. They don't know that school curriculum is being legislated. They don't know how much time our children spend preparing for and taking tests. And they may not even realize we abolished the State Board of Education so we have no place but the Legislature and the Governor's office—or the press—to take our concerns.

What is "The Media"?

The media includes many different channels of communication—radio, television, newspapers, magazines and the Internet. Each provides different opportunities to reach particular audiences with a specific message.

What is "Media Relations"?

Media Relations is a planned, proactive effort to build relationships with media contacts and a visible presence in local media outlets to raise community awareness.

What is "Media Advocacy"?

Media Advocacy has a tight focus on the issues, proposed solutions and legislative process. Media Advocacy is a subset of a larger Media Relations effort.

Where to Start

Step 1. Put together a media contact list

A good starting point is to put together a list of newspapers, television and radio stations that cover your community. Call to find the appropriate contact person, address, phone and fax numbers, and E-mail addresses. Ask for contacts who cover school issues and public policy. Your list could include reporters, producers, editorial writers, news editors, assignment editors, and so on. Be sure to ask for submission guidelines.

A good first step is to contact your district Communications Office and ask if they'll share their media list. Another good resource for newspapers is the [Minnesota Newspapers Directory](#).

Decide whether or not to include statewide and regional center media outlets (e.g., Duluth, St. Cloud, Rochester).

Step 2. Monitor the media

Recruit volunteers to read the newspapers and clip related articles, and to watch and prepare brief summaries of local news broadcasts (check the Internet to see if your television station has a Web site that posts news reports). Add the reporters who are covering your issues to your list. Ask your school district if they provide a clipping service to school board members and ask to be put on the distribution list. Over time, you will begin to see how much effort each media outlet puts into researching the issues and how willing they are to support our schools.

Step 3. Put Together a Media Relations/Communications Plan

The scope of your communications plan will be determined by the core purposes of your organization or coalition. The key is to keep communications focused and timely. Concentrate on just one or two key issues, define your target audiences, the media channels to reach them, and the pivotal moments when your key messages will be most relevant. A good starting point is to "take the pulse" of your local community's support for public education. (See [Trust Discussion Notes](#), MinnSPRA Fall Conference, November 2001.)

Step 4. Put together a press kit

A press kit is a natural extension of the organizing work you do. It generally includes a fact sheet about your organization or coalition that states who you are (description of membership/list of member organizations), what you do (purposes/activities), where you're located (geographic focus), and when and why you got together (brief history and mission statement). Include "Impact Statements" (a bullet list of issues and their impacts) or "Issues Briefs" (longer summaries of the issues and their local impacts). It can also include local parent/school stories illustrating the impacts, and always includes contacts for more information.

Step 5. Communicate with the Media

Whenever decisions are made that will have local impacts, let the public know! There are several different ways to do this:

- Contact a reporter
- Write a letter to the editor
- Submit an OpEd piece
- Meet with an editorial board
- Issue a press release
- Give an interview
- Organize a media event

Step 6. Keep Track of Your Efforts

Make a log of your contacts with the media and archive your results. This is essential to paving the way for volunteers who follow you.

Top 10 Tips for Effective Media Relations

1. Stay local. Your hometown newspaper is your best bet for building community support, but getting stories shared between rural-suburban-urban communities is an important element to building statewide support. The key is to keep the stories local, even if your target media outlets include other areas.
2. Keep it focused. You may have many issues to bring to the media, but stick to one at a time or they'll lose their impact. Develop a calendar of media efforts timing the effort to the issue. To get the most impact during the session, refer to your elected officials by name and cite legislation by name and bill number when you talk to the media.
3. Keep your press alive. A good article can have a long life. Send clippings to your local and state elected officials, coalition partners and other decision-makers.
4. Don't forget your own media outlets. Take advantage of your coalition newsletters, publications, local radio and cable programs to educate and get others involved in your campaign.
5. Just the facts. Stick to what you know and never exaggerate. Remember, you can always get back to reporters after finding the right answer.
6. Don't just say it—show it. A demonstration or real-life testimonial is the best way to illustrate your point. Invite a reporter to your school!
7. Build relationships. Get to know the reporters who cover education issues and take time to meet editorial boards. Relationships develop over time!
8. Put media relations in your action plan. Media relations should be a year-round function, part of the "official" operations of your coalition or organization.
9. Appoint a spokesperson. This contact person must be fully informed about your local education issues.
10. Take advantage of all media outlets. Elected officials may monitor newspapers most often, but radio and television have a powerful impact on public opinion and should not be overlooked.

Developing good relationships with reporters and other media contacts is an important part of developing a media strategy. You want them to value what you say and give you favorable press. By maintaining contact with reporters who cover stories related school issues, you will be more likely to have them take the time to come to your events or write an extra article.

The Interview - Tips for Talking to the Press

Talking to a reporter should be as natural as talking to any professional. The only difference is, what you say might be recorded in a newspaper story, in a radio report or even on television for a large audience.

Getting press coverage can be very valuable to your local efforts to support public education. So how do you get from point A, wanting to communicate your news – to point B – getting accurately reported coverage? Here are some helpful hints to get you on the right track.

Preparing for an interview

Find out which media outlets (newspapers, television, radio) are covering education issues in your area and get the contact information for the education reporter or editor.

Monitor the reporting to see which issues are being covered and how they're reported. Is the coverage accurate? Does it show support for public education and education reform? Highlight areas of agreement and disagreement.

Decide where to target your message and do your homework. Prepare a list of the three most important key messages you want the reporter to know. Make these messages short and precise. They will be easier for the reporter to remember and write down.

Use the data (student achievement trends, funding trends, changes in staffing/services) to demonstrate your points. Gather local stories to reinforce your message.

Identify the common ground (stagnant funding, unfunded mandates, etc.) you share with schools across Minnesota. Make a list of areas where everybody seems to be in the same boat with brief examples in your local area.

Contact the reporter. Introduce yourself. Describe your areas of interests/concerns. Briefly mention any articles you have read that stand out.

Ask if the reporter is interested in any particular public education issue or is working on a list of article ideas or an editorial calendar.

Offer to be a resource contact

Offer to provide written materials to give the reporter as background information. This could be a flyer or brochure for your group, information about your school or district, a fact sheet you have prepared from your research, or any other documents that provide valuable information for the reporter to have.

Prepare a list of questions that the reporter might ask. Include the sensitive issues where you anticipate disagreement. Then write down the answers. Be truthful and accurate and only disclose the information you are comfortable giving to the general public. Make sure to include your school's strengths. Doing this will reduce your anxiety because you are preparing yourself for any possibility.

It helps a lot to involve others in preparing and sitting in on the interview. If possible, rehearse your delivery.

Invite the reporter to an event or school

If you intend to give the reporter a tour of the school, check with the school principal. Some days work better than others, depending on what's on the schedule.

If you want the reporter to meet staff and students, make sure to brief them in advance on your key messages.

Conducting the interview

Make sure you have a comfortable, quiet and clean area to hold the press interview. If the interview is by phone, make sure you are prepared and in a quiet area. Bring note paper to take notes and write down action items from the interview. Bring your business card for in-person interviews.

At in-person interviews, make sure to look the reporter in the eyes often.

Always be credible, know the facts, be specific, give examples.

As the reporter asks you questions and you respond, look for opportunities to end your response with one of your key messages.

Example

Key message: "Our student achievement and attendance has improved by xxx%."

Reporter's question: "Why do you feel your school is producing results? The state report shows you are failing."

Possible response: "Our students have improved their attendance and academic achievement by xxx%."

If a reporter asks you about other schools and their problems (financial, academic achievement, etc.), respond by describing the common ground:

- ALL Minnesota districts are hard hit by stagnant funding that hasn't kept pace with inflation
- ALL Minnesota districts have experienced the same spiraling utility and health care costs as homeowners and businesses
- ALL Minnesota districts have deferred maintenance, putting off facility repairs that will only get worse
- ALL Minnesota districts are reeling from unfunded mandates

Your value as a local resource is that you can help the reporter tell the local story about the local impacts of these larger issues.

Take your time to answer questions. Do not be pressured to answer quickly. To get a little thinking time, use a part of the reporter's question at the beginning of your answers.

This gives you time to think as well as lets the editor know you understand the question.

Example

Reporter's question: "What has been the most difficult challenge for your school?"

Possible response: "The most difficult challenge for our school has been to increase our students' attendance. We accomplished that by..."

You can also say "That is a very good question..." or "Let me think about that..." or "I am glad you brought that up. It is very important..."

If the reporter's question is negative, do not reinforce the negative portion of his or her question in your response.

Example

Reporter's question: "Why is your school failing?"

Possible response: "Our school is focusing efforts on the few students who need the most help... that's the value of No Child Left Behind. It helps us know which students need the most help."

If you don't understand a question, say so. Ask the reporter to repeat the question to help you understand.

If you do not know the answer, say so and offer to find out... then do so! This shows the reporter you can be trusted to follow through on requests for information.

If you make a mistake, pause and make the correction. Use humor, if appropriate.

Avoid agreeing with a reporter's statement or opinion. Instead, restate the area of agreement in your own words. This will help the reporter write a stronger article.

Do not make a flippant off the cuff remark; the reporter might use it!

The reporter is mostly interested in writing a newsworthy story, not writing negative things about you or your school. Support the reporter's efforts with solid information, statistics and a newsworthy angle.

These basic principals are guidelines to start you on your road to talking to the press so your parent group and school or district can benefit from potential positive coverage.

Educate the reporter on public education issues whenever possible

If you have a feeling that the reporter may not have understood you, don't be afraid to clarify your statement.

You might want to ask the reporter some questions, like how familiar the reporter is with your schools. Knowing how the reporter is thinking will help you know how much information you need to give in order to be better understood.

If you feel the reporter is negative about public schools, here is your opportunity to educate and influence his or her thinking with facts. Do not stand on a soap box, just be factual and demonstrate your values and successes.

If the reporter is from a TV or radio station, keep your answers short and targeted, and again, no off the cuff remarks. Typically your comments on TV/radio will be very short. Keeping your responses short in the interview will reduce editing out your important message. At the end of the interview, interject with summarizing you three key messages.

Take the opportunity to develop a relationship with the reporter and invite the reporter to contact you any time for information.

Offer the names and contact information of allies to the reporter in case the reporter wants to get more information from another source.

You can ask the reporter when the story will appear or run to make sure you get copies or can record it.

Thank the reporter for the interview.

Interview Don'ts

- Don't say "No Comment." Instead, say "This is confidential information" or "We do not have that information at this time" or "You would have to ask (another contact person)." Basically, give the reporter a reason you cannot answer.
- Don't speculate, forecast or predict unless you have reliable data and you can be perceived as a reliable source.
- Don't say "never, or ever, or forever, or always, etc."
- Don't talk about other school's problems, focus on your agenda.
- If you don't want it printed, don't say it.
- Don't get defensive, emotional, flippant, smug, stuffy, arrogant, sarcastic or hostile.

More Tips for Working With the Media

If you haven't worked with the media, or you have limited experience with the media, here are a few more tips to help you establish contact and generate coverage of local successes and challenges.

How to Contact the Media

Getting coverage of the issues via local media and local public service directors (TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines) will increase awareness at the community level, thereby broadening the audience for your message.

First you need to decide who should receive the information. You are much more likely to get a response if you personalize the information, rather than sending it generically to "editor" or "producer." To find names and contacts for local media outlets you can either make a phone call and ask for the assignment desk or the health/education beat reporter, or consult a media directory, which is available at libraries. Positions at media outlets change frequently, so you may want to call to make sure the contact you received from the directory is still current.

In addition to contacting reporters and editors about stories, don't forget to send information on events and announcements to the calendar editor. Consider collaborating with others to write a letter to the editor or a short opinion piece. Contact your local opinion page editor for submission deadlines.

Keep in mind that you can solicit your local media outlet to do more than just provide publicity. Consider inviting a television station or radio station, local cable network, or area newspaper to attend or even co-sponsor your event or activity.

How to Follow Up/Pitch the Media

After you have identified the correct people at the media outlet, the next step requires contacting the media representatives to follow up and ensure that they know about the importance of what you are doing. The act of contacting a news agency to try to induce them into covering an issue or event is called a "pitch." You should summarize the primary focus of your issue or the event to which you are inviting them within the first 15 seconds of the conversation. Emphasize the value and importance of the issue to the station's audience, and make recommendations about use of local statistics, district and school needs, possible story ideas linking issues to learning, etc.

Here is how your pitch might sound:

"Hello, I am _____ with _____. And I am calling to tell you about _____.

Did you know that _____ schools in _____ are being impacted by _____?

Parent volunteers are involved in _____ by working with _____ to _____.

I hope you're interested in learning more about some positive stories about what's happening in our schools."

When pitching stories to different publications and TV or radio programs, offer unique story angles and always remember to give the 5 W's: who, what, where, when and why.

Try to get the station's public service department to attend any presentations your group will be giving. Send the public service director a letter and announcement of the event.

Keys to Successful Pitching

1. Watch your language. Don't use diminishing words. (I just called to...)
2. Watch your energy level. You want to sound enthusiastic and passionate about the issue.
3. Be prepared. Always have a one-page fact sheet prepared in case the reporter asks for more information.
4. Follow up with the reporter. Give the reporter new and current information or updates.
5. Be aggressive. Approach the news agency with the idea that this is an important issue and get to what is unique about it.
6. Use visualization. If you are pitching an event, always try to get the reporter to visualize it. Be as descriptive as possible.
7. Set a goal for regularly contacting the media (e.g., weekly or monthly).