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“Only together can we really make a difference.”

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Theodore E. Comstock, Esq.

Contact for *focus*:

Kathleen O'Sullivan

Coordinator, Communications
and Policy Services

Email: kosullivan@nhsba.org

NH School Boards Association

46 Donovan Street, Suite 4

Concord, NH 03301

Phone: **603-228-2061**

Toll Free: 1-800-979-9159

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on New Hampshire School Boards

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Media Madness: Board Communications Strategy

“When parents really know what’s going on in the schools, they support education. Informed parents and citizens become strong allies.”

- From NSBA’s *Becoming A Better Board Member*

You may not want it to happen, but there will be times when your school board will have to deal with the media. This does not have to be a painful process. Often the reporters aren’t sure of the subject matter and may feel as intimidated as you are!

There will be times when working with the media is to your advantage, whether it’s to promote yourself or to let the public know what’s happening. In fact, with some planning, the media can actually become a “partner” in the work of your school board.

It’s a good idea to have a strategy for board communications and media relations in place that spells out how the board will deal with the media in good times and in bad times.

There are plenty of times the media wants your news. The flow of information is a two-way street. The media won’t know about good things going on in your district if you don’t let them know. If you build a positive relationship in the good times, the media will trust you, listen to you, and turn to you in bad times. The public who sees the positive messages may do so as well.

“Good times”

Is there someone who can be a spokesperson, or someone willing to promote what’s going on in your district? A spokesperson can use the media to keep the community informed about the school system, and can also be the one designated to make official statements to the media on behalf of the board.

The spokesperson, should develop a friendly but professional relationship with the media, provide them with information, and be credible.

“Bad times”

The media is certain to get wind of bad news. Have a strategy worked out in advance.

In a crisis situation:

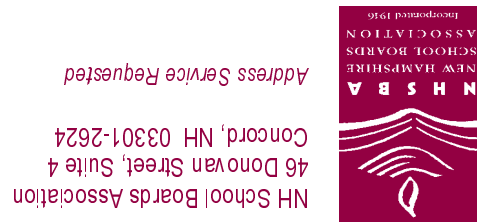
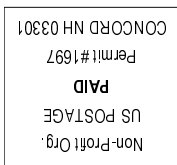
- Designate a spokesperson to handle all media requests (typically the Chair and/or the Superintendent). When the crisis occurs, let everyone know exactly who that person is and that no one else is to talk to the media. Let secretaries, etc., know that calls must be routed to the spokesperson.
- Ensure the person in charge knows the facts and responds to media requests promptly.
- DON’T avoid the media in bad times.
- Prepare a statement dealing with the crisis situation. Distribute the statement to the media when requests come in. This ensures accurate information goes to everyone.
- Keep staff informed as to what’s going on. An informed staff will help avoid rumors.
- Try to find out the facts *and* the fictions of the situation. You can easily dispel rumors if you know what they are.
- Publicize the fact that district officials are looking into the matter. That may calm the atmosphere.
- Once a decision is made, communicate it.
- After a crisis, or at periodic intervals, evaluate your strategy and how it works.

Interview Tips

If you get an interview request, feel free to ask the reporter his/her name, the media outlet and what the story is about or the angle of the story. Also ask if background information is needed. Don’t hesitate to say you need time to gather information. If you think you’re the wrong person to be commenting on the story, suggest the right person.

Before the interview:

- List three points you want to get across during interview.
- Review possible questions and answers.
- Let the board chair and superintendent know



During the interview:

- Know what message you want to get across.
- The first thirty seconds can be the most critical, avoid “reacting” to the initial question.
- Speak clearly and avoid jargon, acronyms, euphemisms, “educationese”, and “red flag” words.
- Wait until a question is fully asked before answering.
- Watch for a question that is re-worded to try and get another answer from you. Stick to your facts and keep the interview going where you want it to go.
- Be honest – don’t lie to the reporter.
- Don’t know the answer? Don’t fake it. Assure the reporter you will find the answer or assist in finding a resource.
- Be personal; relate your story in terms of real people, not institutions or abstract ideas. Example: ‘This change affects 40 children in Grade 8,’ NOT ‘The new program will have a profound impact on our school.’
- Don’t tell the reporter how to write their story or that you want to see it before it’s published.
- NEVER say anything that you don’t want to see in print, or hear on the airwaves. Remember, nothing is “off the record.”
- Correct errors or false data used by the reporter.

- Avoid letting reporters put words in your mouth (would you say...? NO, instead I would say...).
- Avoid letting the reporter start with a premise which is incorrect or incomplete.
- If an issue arises that you simply cannot talk about, never say no comment” — simply explain that you cannot go into detail about a certain topic. Having the reporter write that you “declined to comment” is better than reading that “officials were not available for comment,” or “repeated calls to board members went unanswered.”

After the interview

- Jot down notes about what was covered and what you said, and be sure to share these notes with the Superintendent and the Board.
- Watch for the story to appear. If there’s an error in the story, call the reporter directly to point out the mistake politely and professionally. If you think the story was good, call and say so. Don’t thank the reporter for doing it, just comment that it was done well.
- Send follow-up materials to the reporter.

Your board should have a pro-active communications program that establishes the board, and not the media, as the leader in providing information about your schools!

Here are some communications tips from NSBA’s *Becoming A Better Board Member*:

Lesson 1: Don’t expect the news media to tell the board’s side of the story if they haven’t been supplied the facts.

Lesson 2: The citizens of a community who do not have children in school still pay taxes, and they have a right to demand information about their schools.

Lesson 3: Never forget your responsibility to listen to the people you represent as a school board member.

Lesson 4: A lack of communication with the public can back your board into a corner from which it cannot escape.

Lesson 5: Communication will not solve every problem, but don’t expect to survive without it.

Lesson 6: Being a good board member is never easy.

Lesson 7: Never underestimate the power of public opinion. It is formidable.