Working with the Media

By Renée Rybak Lang and Michael Spaeth

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.

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 policymaking while answering their specific questions.

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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.

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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 upmost importance. Reporters remember who is responsive and who is not, so when they call, always ask...
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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