



# Advisory

The Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) is an advisory and consultative organization composed of the CEOs of each of the 72 District School Boards in Ontario; Public, Catholic and French Language.

**“Communication trust is evident in human interactions that communicate shared understanding and good intentions. Clear, high-quality, open, and frequent communication are the hallmarks of communication trust. So too are sharing information, telling the truth, keeping confidences, and being willing to admit mistakes.”**

Hargreaves, Andy & Fink, Dean. (2006). *Sustainable Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 213

## Developing Effective Media Relations

### Why is it important to understand media relations?

The media shape our opinions. Media take many forms – print, websites, webcasts, radio, television, and digital media. The media influence education stakeholders including parents, students, the staff, and community. News reports about the actions of students and staff are a regular feature of the media.

Reporters are always interested in a story. Tragedies are the biggest source of news, and when one occurs in a school district, there is high media interest. Effective media relations develop positive stories to share with parents and the wider community, while also building a foundation of trust for the unfortunate times when boards and staff members are faced with challenging crises.

All staff members can work to improve media relations. All areas of the school system have good news to share with the public and should find opportunities to do this as often as possible. A human interest or a unique angle can make a good story for publication. Staff members at the system and school levels and members of the corporate board exercise significant influence in the community when speaking about their work to students, parents and other community members.

Preparation and planning are essential to positive media relations. Supervisory officers must work to build a culture in which the staff is aware of the importance of communication with the media, and is open to improving relations. It is important to focus on the regular communication vehicles of news releases, reports, and calendars to keep the media and public informed of the work of the board and to engage them further. The board must have effective media policies and procedures, plans for critical incidents, and communication protocols. Staff training is essential. When staff members know what is expected, they will be confident in working with the media.

### What does the Ministry of Education say about media relations?

The Ministry of Education has a Communication Department which handles media inquiries and news releases. Regular features from the Communications Department include information on EQAO scores, updates on new directions, and other matters of public interest. There are sections in the *Education Act* and Regulations that relate to the use of the media in communication. These include the following:

#### **Education Act**

169.1 (4) Every board shall take steps to, (a) bring the plan [multi-year plan]...to the attention of supporters and employees of the board; and (b) report to supporters and employees of the board about progress in implementing the plan...

## Quick Crisis Checklist

- ✓ Ensure the safety of all students and staff affected.
- ✓ Notify the proper authorities e.g., Fire, Ambulance, Police, Public Health, Ministry of Labour.
- ✓ Notify parents when individual students under 18 are concerned.
- ✓ The school trustee should be informed of the situation.
- ✓ Assemble a Crisis Response Team. For school situations, this would include the superintendent of the school, principal, communications specialist, and other staff (e.g. social workers, psychology staff, or others depending on the nature of the situation).
- ✓ Review the facts of the crisis.
- ✓ Identify a spokesperson to respond to media inquiries during the crisis.
- ✓ Prepare a statement for the media and be prepared for follow-up questions.
- ✓ Designate a place for media interviews. Usually this will be outside the affected building, out of the way of emergency response measures.
- ✓ Do not reveal information if there is an issue of confidentiality or legality.
- ✓ Do not speculate about the event, its causes, or its outcomes.
- ✓ Prepare information to be relayed by reception at the central board office and/or at the affected school.
- ✓ Where possible, let students, staff, and parents know about an event before the media report on it. Use letters home, e-mails, or postings on board or school websites. If early notification is not possible, ensure that there is communication from the school or board to students, parents, and staff after the fact, even if there is a high degree of media coverage.

218.1 Duties of board members – A member of a board shall ... (c) consult with parents, students and supporters of the board on the board's multi-year plan... (d) bring concerns of parents, students and supporters of the board to the attention of the board.

252 (2) ...the treasurer shall, (a) publish the financial statements and the auditor's report...in a daily or weekly newspaper that...has sufficient circulation within the area of jurisdiction of the board to provide reasonable notice to those affected by them.

302. (9.1) A board shall ensure that a copy of the policies and guidelines it establishes [governing the conduct of persons in the schools and disciplining pupils] are available to the public.

### Regulations:

**Regulation 298**, s. 11 (19) ...the principal of a school shall solicit the views of the school council with respect to ...3. School action plans for improvement, based on the Education Quality and Accountability Office's reports on the results of tests of pupils, and the communication of those plans to the public.

**Regulation 304**, s. 4.1 With respect to each professional activity day...every board shall, (b)...make available the agenda [date, location, time, participants, and program of scheduled professional activities] by, (i) posting it on the website of the board and of each participating school that has a website...

**Regulation 304**, s. 7. (1) Every board shall publish annually its school calendar...

**Regulation 612/00**, s. 35 (2) Methods of advertising vacancies in parent member positions on a parent involvement committee include, (b) advertisements in newspapers with general circulation...(c) advertisements on radio or television stations...(e) notices on the board's website and on the websites of the board's schools.

## Supervisory officers are expected to:

The supervisory officers of a board set the tone and expectations for staff with regard to media relations and are prepared to lead in the following ways:

### 1. *Build a Culture of Media Awareness*

- Offer training in media relations to system staff responsible for modelling positive media relationships.
- Train and support members of the corporate board to further their role in developing successful media relationships and preparing for media interviews.
- Develop a board communication plan which includes schools to highlight the accomplishments of students, the staff, and parent community.
- Set expectations for positive messages to the community, messages that enhance the work of the board as well as setting the stage for positive media relations. School and central staff need to understand that they are responsible for communications in their areas.

### 2. *Develop Positive Relationships with Media People:*

- Build professional relationships with editors and the education reporters of local media outlets. Share and explain important reports, position papers, and notes on issues.
- Prepare news conferences on issues that have a high profile.
- Facilitate the publication of major stories or contribute articles. Participate in television interview programs or contribute columns in local media or blogs for the board website.
- Use well-considered tweets to let the media and the public know about good news and interesting ideas.

- Discuss with the board chair and vice-chair the involvement of members of the board in proactive communication.
- 3. Provide Regular Communications:**
- Forward to the media all information required by the Ministry for communication to the public.
  - Provide news releases, media advisories, open house events, and photo opportunities at special events.
  - Coordinate a calendar of events.
  - Ensure that the board website is refreshed regularly and checked for accuracy and currency.
  - Assign an individual as a media contact for the board, listing this person's name on the board website. This information should be readily available at reception in the board office and be known to all staff.
- 4. React in Appropriate Ways**
- Ensure that inaccurate reports in the media are corrected. System staff can remedy these situations with a call to the reporter or, if necessary, the board chair can write a letter to the editor.
  - Notify the media of incidents or situations such as inclement weather, high water, or emergency school closures.
- 5. Manage Crisis Communications**
- Have a crisis communication plan in place. Elements of a good plan include:
    - identifying crisis teams for schools or central office;
    - training spokespersons for incidents; and
    - preparing templates of letters to the media, community, staff, and parents before a crisis happens.

## What are the important practices for effectiveness?

Supervisory officers can strengthen relationships with the media by:

- fostering an environment of openness in communication and responding in a positive and proactive manner to both good and bad news;
- providing leadership in the development of media policies, procedures, and protocols to ensure good media relationships are valued by all staff;
- preparing system staff to be spokespersons on relevant issues in a clear and confident manner;
- ensuring that members of the board, principals, vice-principals and senior managers are prepared for media interviews; and
- understanding the role of the Communication Department or assigned communication staff. These staff members are the first line of contact with the media spokespersons for media interviews and for story development.

## How do I know that an effective Media Relations Plan is in place?

A Media Relations Plan is part of the communications strategy of a board. The indicators of an effective plan are:

- Staff members are guided in their work with the media by board policy and administrative procedures and protocols.
- Protocols enhance the Media Relations Plan, providing support for board spokespersons and crisis response teams. They set out expectations for staff involvement with the media and clarify the rules for staff members with regard to photography, videotaping, access to spokespersons, and responses to high profile visitors.

## The Media Has Called: Preparing for Your Interview

- Ensure that you are the person who should be the spokesperson on the issue.
- Ask the reporter the following: his or her name, company, the story deadline, the angle, and the names of other interviewees. Ask for time to prepare for the interview and arrange the time for that discussion.
- Ascertain the facts of the situation. Ask the W and H questions: who, what, when, where, why, how, and how much.
- List the people, school, and groups that are affected or who should be mentioned.
- Prepare two or three key messages for the interview.
- Prepare potential questions both positive and negative and think them through. Practise if you have time.
- Deliver your messages in the interview. Do not go beyond your key messages. Keep going back to them when asked the questions.
- It is important not to speculate or comment on the actions of others.
- Be silent when there is a legal reason to do so. This includes privacy issues, negotiations or reports in progress, but not approved by the board.
- Use “we”, not “I” to avoid giving personal opinions.
- Resist the temptation to fill silences, answer repetitive questions or comment after an interview is over. It is recommended that you do not repeat the interviewer's question before you start speaking.
- Do not respond to negative questions
- Avoid “education speak”.
- When you are finished stop speaking. Nothing is off the record.

*“Working with the Media  
Most people learn most of  
what they know about schools  
through the media. Therefore,  
school boards need to ensure  
that their local media have  
the information they need to  
present a balanced picture to  
their communities. This is an  
achievable goal. In spite of  
what many people think, the  
media generally try to present  
a fair picture of a situation or  
event.”*

Chapter 12: Communications  
and media relations  
*Good Governance: A Guide for  
Trustees, School Boards, Directors of  
Education and Communities*  
Ontario Education Services  
Corporation  
[http://cge.ontarioschooltrustees.org/  
read/trustee-professional-development](http://cge.ontarioschooltrustees.org/read/trustee-professional-development)



- Staff members are assigned to respond to media inquiries, organize the flow of information to media outlets, and monitor board and school websites for accuracy and consistency.
- General training activities to support effective, on-going media relations are provided to all staff so that they can relay positive messages about schools and the board.
- Specific training is provided for all individuals who are potential spokespersons – members of the board, system staff, principals, vice-principals and senior managers.
- Staff members with responsibilities for media are given an annual timetable or calendar of regular media events and required news releases. This allows for early planning and fosters on-going communication.
- The board and schools have a planned process to obtain media coverage for special events.
- The Media Relations Plan sets out expectations for the use of social media in the school, including print materials, board websites, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube.
- The Media Relations Plan has a budget allotment to ensure that the resources are in place to implement the Plan.
- The board has a well-defined process for reviewing the Media Relations Plan and for responding to any identified gaps.

### **If as a supervisory officer, I have concerns and need assistance, what should I do?**

- Some boards have identified communications staff and/or departments to assist the work of the board and staff. These people will have expertise that allows them to recommend the nature of the communication and the communication vehicles to be used. In extraordinary circumstances, the services of outside communications specialists or public relations firms may be employed for crisis issues or for highly-charged political situations.
- Board staff members assigned to communications duties may become members of CACE, the Canadian Association of Communicators in Education. CACE goals are to provide regional networking, an annual national conference, and professional recognition. In addition, CACE provides templates and models for communication as well as a skills bank of practitioners. There is an on-line forum, a Twitter page and Facebook page where members can seek advice and solutions to challenges they are facing. <http://www.cace-acace.org/en/>
- Another helpful organization is the National School Public Relations Association. Its website contains professional development opportunities, conferences, and an area on communication strategies. <http://www.nspr.org/info>
- OPSBA and OCSTA offer useful resources for directors of education supporting members of the board with communications. Supervisory officers can contact the Media Desk as required. [http://www.opsba.org/index.php?q=site\\_resources](http://www.opsba.org/index.php?q=site_resources)  
[www.ocsta.on.ca](http://www.ocsta.on.ca)
- OPSOA and OPC have partnered to develop on-line resources to support superintendents, principals, and vice-principals. The OPC website contains a three-part program for principals and vice-principals, consisting of Public Relations, Media Training, and Crisis Communication. This is an effective option for training staff in communications. [http://www.principals.ca/Documents/OPC\\_Catalogue\\_2011\\_12.pdf](http://www.principals.ca/Documents/OPC_Catalogue_2011_12.pdf)