

A school's guide to dealing with the media

Reporters have a job to do and it's important to understand that, while also knowing exactly what your rights and responsibilities are. Your initial response to the media is an opportunity to tell your story. Therefore when a reporter contacts you, it's important to respond in a credible, reliable, timely and accurate way.

This guide was developed by Canterbury Principals groups with the Ministry of Education to support you and help you support your staff, students and community when there is media interest in your school.

BE PREPARED — stay calm, follow policy

- Does your Board have a media policy?
- Who has delegated authority to speak to the media? Board Chair or Principal? In what circumstances?
- Do your staff know about and understand the policy? (ie they should not speak to media)
- Have staff been reminded not to comment?
- Is there an issue coming up that might attract media attention?
- Have you thought about what you may be asked and what you will say?
- Have a prepared statement in advance?

Call NZSTA for advice on media policies.

Think about:

- Media training for you and/or the Board Chair.
- People that can help.

UNDERSTAND YOUR OBLIGATIONS as a Crown Entity as well as an employer.

Both the Privacy Act and the Official Information Act apply to schools when dealing with:

- Issues and/or complaints about/from staff
- Questions about students/parents
- Official Information Act requests

WHEN CONTACTED BY THE MEDIA

- Who has delegated authority to speak to the media? Board Chair or Principal? In what circumstances?
- Record their name and contact details, then listen.
- Take control – "I'll need to get all the facts before I agree to an interview."
 - ▶ Where is the reporter from?
 - ▶ What kind of story is it? (eg news or feature)
 - ▶ What information do they need?
 - ▶ Who else are they talking to/have they talked to about the story?
 - ▶ What have they said?
 - ▶ What am I responding to?
- Don't be pressured into commenting until you're ready and know what you want to say.
 - ▶ "I need to get all the facts and call you back. What is your deadline?"
- Take the time to make sure that you've got all the background you need to know and have sought any advice that is relevant.
- Inform anyone who may be affected (staff, parents, Ministry of Education) before the story goes out.
- Keep a detailed log of all calls / events / video or photographs taken on school grounds with permission.

Who you can talk to:

- Ministry Senior Advisor
- CPPA – contact president of the association
- CWCSPA – contact president of the association
- Traumatic Incident Team – 0800 848 326
- NZSTA, Employment Advice / Helpdesk – 0800 782 435

DECIDE

- Do you believe it is in your best interest to go ahead with an interview?
- Decide if you want to give a media interview or supply a prepared statement (which can be a 'no comment' statement or key messages and information).
- Can it be an opportunity to talk about what you are doing and get your side of the story across? This needs to be balanced with: are you in a position to say anything. It may be too early to be interviewed or it may be a matter which you are unable to publicly speak about i.e. an employment matter or subject to legal proceedings.
- Remember it's very likely a reporter will go ahead with a story even if you don't take part.
- Weigh up the risks of having no comment from the school and a potentially unbalanced story.

SETTING UP AN INTERVIEW

- Set a time for the interview/response.
- Let them know you'll also record the interview for your records.
- Manage the setting for the interview (place, room, time).
- Wear what will look appropriate on camera.
- Prepare four or five key messages.
- This is a great opportunity to share the school's story and build reputation. The key messages must be factually correct and are best when they include accurate data / facts / examples / third party endorsements.
- Practice delivering the messages.
- Ensure your messages are not speculative, blame others or provide unconfirmed causes.

THE INTERVIEW

- Remember – there is NO SUCH THING as “off the record”.
- Be open and honest – if it isn't going as you planned then you do have the right to end the interview – but do it in a courteous way.
- Manage the interview by consistently pushing your key messages.
- Stay calm, have the appropriate tone and body language (enthusiastic, concern, thoughtful).
- Stick to your prepared plan and key messages – link negative questions back to your positive key message.
- Stick to the facts and what you know and are sure of. If you are unsure then say you don't have the information to answer that right now but can find out and get back to them.
- Don't add unprepared information to your key messages to fill reporters pauses.
- Flag your key messages to ensure attention and focus eg “the most important ..”, “ the best part ..”, “ the bottom line ..” etc.
- If you're unclear, then ask them to clarify the question.
- Manage photos and filming taken within the school. Make sure that any permissions required by parents of students is provided.

NEXT STEPS

- If you agreed to send further information to the reporter, make sure you do.
- Are you able to see article before it goes to press?
- Incorrect information printed – contact the editor or chief reporter directly if you have been deliberately misrepresented or misquoted and seek a formal response/remedy.
- If you feel you're being harassed by a reporter, contact their editor or chief reporter.
- OIA requests – these need to be replied to within the statutory timeframes – 20 working days. You can contact NZSTA Helpdesk for advice.

REVIEW

- After media interest has settled down, seek feedback from others involved.
- What other actions could have been taken or how could you have done anything differently?
- Use it as an opportunity to learn and take into the next interview you do.
- Review the Board's media policy. Does it need adjustment?