

There's a reporter at my door!
Now what do I do?



Media guidelines & tips for BOCES staff

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Media guidelines for all staff of the Capital Region BOCES

The Capital Region BOCES Board of Education has appointed the District Superintendent and President of the Board as the official spokespeople for the organization.

That said, with more than 1,200 employees serving thousands of students in four counties, it is only practical to designate other staff members as media spokespeople when appropriate.

This staff handbook has been developed to provide basic guidelines in deciding whether or not you are the appropriate BOCES spokesperson on a given news story and to clarify notification protocols that must be followed if you speak with the media as a representative of the Capital Region BOCES.

This handbook also provides some basic information to build your confidence and skills when speaking with reporters or inviting media coverage of your BOCES program, service or special event.

If a reporter contacts you...

As an employee of the Capital Region BOCES, you may occasionally be called by a reporter to comment on the work you do or to give a local perspective to a national education issue or trend. It is impossible to predict the variety and scope of news stories that staff may be called to comment upon. Judgement calls will need to be made – which is why it is important that you always notify your immediate supervisor and/or division director *before* speaking as a representative of BOCES. In general, BOCES staff are expected to follow these steps when contacted by a reporter.

1. Record basic information. This includes name of the reporter; media outlet he or she represents (i.e., Times Union, WNYT-TV); what information he or she is looking for; what deadline the reporter is working under; and a phone number where he or she can be reached. Once you have this information, end the conversation here by promising to get back to the reporter shortly. This short delay gives you time to run it by your supervisor, collect your thoughts/ information and develop key talking points.

2. Notify your immediate supervisor and/or division director of the media call. If the topic is of a controversial or potentially controversial nature, the BOCES District Superintendent should be notified before anyone speaks with the media. For more routine media inquiries, notify your immediate supervisor and – together – decide whether or not you are the best person to speak on this topic.

3. If you have been authorized to speak with the reporter, get back to him or her as promised. But first, discuss talking points with your supervisor or division director and review the tips in this handbook to build your confidence and skills. *If you are speaking about a particular service (i.e., a CAPIT service, CTE course or special education program) be sure to mention the Capital Region BOCES as the parent organization.* This builds greater public understanding of the scope and influence of the BOCES as a whole.

4. If you decide you are not the best person to talk to the reporter, decide who is – and ask that person to get back to the reporter as promised. Give that staff person the basic information you took down from the reporter – and emphasize the deadline the reporter is working under.

5. Notification about a media contact should, generally, continue up the organizational chain of command. If only as a courtesy, it is always a good idea to let those higher up the chain of command know that you've spoken to the media on a particular topic – preferably in advance of the broadcast or publication. Program managers, for example, should notify their division director of an impending news story and the division director may, in turn, notify the BOCES district superintendent. It's also a good idea to provide division directors and the district superintendent a copy of all newspaper articles in which your BOCES program or service is highlighted.

If you want to initiate media coverage for a program or event

First run the idea by your immediate supervisor and decide – together – if media coverage is appropriate or advised.

If so, decide if there is a communication specialist in your division (or in the school district you serve) who can be called upon to develop a press release for you. If not, refer to this handbook on how to develop a press release.

NOTE: All press releases about BOCES programs are to be approved by the division director (or his/her designee) prior to release. As a courtesy, you should also forward a copy of the release to the District Superintendent.

Releasing student information or photos to the media

The Capital Region BOCES has an “opt-in” policy when it comes to the release of student directory information under the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

What this means is that prior written authorization must be obtained from a student’s parent or legal guardian *before* any student directory information (name, grade, activities, photo, etc.) can be released to the media, used in BOCES publications or posted on the BOCES Web site.

The BOCES staff member with primary responsibility for the student(s) involved should keep a permanent record of the parent/guardian’s permission in the event that permission is ever challenged.

TIP: When in doubt, it’s better to ask permission, than beg forgiveness!

Guidelines for BOCES staff working within school districts

Many people employed by the Capital Region BOCES spend much of their work day within area school districts and may find themselves called upon to speak on behalf of the district *OR* the BOCES.

It is important to follow and respect the media policies or guidelines that exist in the school district(s) you serve. It is always better to get *prior authorization* from the building principal and/or school superintendent before responding to a reporter or initiating media coverage. Most school districts also have a communications office that may prefer to take the lead on school-related publicity.

Bottom line? Know and respect the policies of both the BOCES and the district(s) you serve.

Voicing an opinion as a citizen

The Capital Region BOCES recognizes that staff members are also private citizens. You have the right, for example, to voice your opinion on an issue by writing a letter to the editor of your local newspaper. Use good judgement in these cases and consider whether or not your position as a private citizen may be construed, by some, to represent the organization – especially if the topic is related to education. It is not unheard of for a newspaper to include your work title or connection to the issue at hand – even if you do not represent yourself as an employee of a public agency.

Yes, exceptions may apply

In an organization as large and diverse as the Capital Region BOCES, nuances will exist in which exceptions may apply regarding the media guidelines outlined above.

Some example? The NERIC staff represent other BOCES/school districts beyond the Capital Region BOCES. The staff of the BOCES Communications Service are frequently called upon to serve as the spokespeople for area school districts. And in crisis situations, the BOCES Central Administration may prefer to work *as a team* with front line staff in reaching out or responding to the media.

Procedures for dealing with the media:

Who should respond?

In a crisis...

1. In a crisis situation, BOCES line staff should immediately notify their program manager. Program managers should notify division directors who in turn will notify the district superintendent.
2. Calls from reporters should be directed to the Superintendent and/or BOCES communications coordinator working with the DS. A single spokesperson should speak for the entire organization during a crisis. Multiple spokespersons making contradictory statements can make matters worse.
3. As soon as the crisis occurs, and before any details are known, the district spokesperson should be prepared to make an immediate statement to:
 - Indicate that officials are aware of, and on top of, the situation;
 - Assure that details are being investigated;
 - Assure all interested persons that all appropriate information will be shared as soon as possible.
4. If the questions are related to a specific area (i.e., budget, personnel) and the reply is a complicated explanation, the person in charge of that area should be involved in responding to reporters to make sure the information is explained correctly. If the explanation is extremely complicated, the communications coordinator can write the explanation and fax it to the reporter(s).
5. For more on communicating in a crisis, refer to "Crisis Communications Checklist" at the end of this handbook.

For more routine media calls...

1. In a less critical situation, the program manager, building principal or division director may be the best person to answer questions from the media. If you are uncomfortable talking to a reporter, by all means say so and discuss alternative spokespeople or call the BOCES communications coordinator for advice. Do NOT let the reporter bully you! If you are uncomfortable with the way the interview is proceeding, tell the reporter that you need to gather all the relevant facts before commenting further, and get a phone number where you can call him/her back. Be sure to return the reporter's phone call when you said you would. Otherwise you run the risk of reading that you "refused to comment."
2. For feature (often "good news") stories, the building principal, teachers, staff or other involved adults are usually the best media contacts since they are the most intimately aware of the program or topic.

Taking control in an interview with a reporter

The following information provides suggestions on how to act and react to any reporter. The Capital Region BOCES has a policy of being as open as possible when it comes to working with the media. We have found that being proactive and honest with reporters, as with all our publics, builds credibility and leads to the best relationships.

Who's afraid of reporters?

In a potentially negative situation, almost everyone is afraid to speak to a reporter for fear of saying the wrong thing or of being misquoted. Knowing what you want to say and how to say it, can minimize that fear. To assume a reporter plans to pounce upon you in the manner of Mike Wallace of *60 Minutes* is unrealistic. Most reporters are considerate and are only looking to get the facts to substantiate their story. They are most likely to get aggressive only when they sense you are hiding something.

The number one mistake most people make when being interview by a reporter is letting the reporter take control of the interview. The reporter wants to steer the direction of the interview. Knowing what you want to say and when to say it will give you the confidence to take control of the interview.

Remember: every opportunity to talk with a reporter, even under negative conditions, is an opportunity to put forth a positive message. Just be sure you have followed the Capital Region BOCES' organizational protocols before assuming the role of spokesperson.

What to do when there's a reporter on the phone

If you get a phone call from a reporter, politely ask the reporter for five things:

1. His/her name
2. What media outlet he or she works for (i.e., Daily Gazette?, WRGB-TV?)
3. What information is the reporter looking for? (Get as much detail as possible about the questions they have and the scope of the story they are working on. This will help you -- or whoever is deemed the appropriate spokesperson -- be prepared to respond later on.)
4. When is his or her deadline?
5. What is the reporter's phone number, so you can call him or her back?

Then end the phone call politely by promising to get back to the reporter shortly; *do not comment "off the cuff."* This short delay gives you time to run the call by your supervisor (BOCES protocol), collect your thoughts/information and develop key talking points.

What to do when there's a reporter at your door

Just because there is a reporter at your door does not mean you have to immediately talk to the reporter. Follow steps 1-4 above and then let the reporter know when you will see him/her.

NOTE: The uniqueness of a camera crew can be very disruptive to the educational process. TV crews should not be allowed to film during the school day unless special permission has been secured from the principal and only if an administrator or communications coordinator oversees what they are doing and where they are going. Keep in mind the BOCES policy on securing written permission from a parent or guardian before releasing student directory information to the press (page 3).

Getting ready to talk

One of the worst things to say is “No comment.” That’s a guilty plea in the eyes of the public. It is often associated with criminals in handcuffs on the courthouse steps. At least say that you don’t have sufficient information at this time to discuss it and that you will get back to him/her as soon as you can.

Get ready for the reporter by:

1. Getting all the facts.
2. Organizing your thoughts. (Ask a co-worker to help you!)
3. Asking yourself all the questions the reporter might ask.
4. Having answers for all the questions you come up with.
5. Developing one or more KEY message points.
6. Practicing what you want to say.
7. Having message points prepared and on hard copy to give to the media.

Developing key message points

In preparing to meet with a reporter, use the following information to help you organize and present what you want covered. You can control the direction and content of an interview by being prepared and knowing what you want to say.

1. Decide the key message point(s) you want to make with the reporter. Message points are what you want to see reported in the news. Keep your message points to no more than three. Keep them short – a sentence each.
2. Write down your message points and keep them with you. Look at them if you need to when talking with a reporter. A reporter won’t care if you have to read them, a reporter is only interested in what you say.
3. Write your message points into positive statements: “We want a safe and secure learning environment in our schools.” Instead of: “We don’t want to have any drugs or guns in our schools.”
4. Speak in your public’s interest. Describe how parents, senior citizens, students, etc. (depending on the issue) are benefiting from the actions being taken (or will soon benefit).
5. Write your message points in plain language that is free of jargon and everyone can understand. Try writing your message points the way you would explain something to a friend or relative (who doesn’t work in your field).
6. Develop supporting arguments/material for your message points. Have facts and figures available. Provide examples.
7. Practice saying your message points out loud with someone.
8. Look for opportunities to use your message points. When you feel the reporter is getting into an area you are unfamiliar with or you don’t want to discuss, use your message points to bring the reporter back to what YOU want to emphasize. This is an effective measure for maintaining control of the interview.

NOTE: Toastmasters International, a club for public speakers, uses as standard practice message points to address questions they don’t know the answers to. They will often start off by saying something like... *“I don’t feel that is as important as understanding that...”* (Then the speaker will go to a point of interest he or she want to talk about – it may be totally unrelated) or *“Let’s not digress from what is really important here...”* (and then addressing another key message point). By doing this and making a smooth transition, YOU can control the interview.

Tips for being interviewed by a reporter

1. Always tell the truth. You can spend a full day telling the truth or a lifetime trying to get out of a lie. When you tell the truth, you will never have to worry about a lousy memory.
2. State your message point(s) first. Keep your explanations short and your message won't get lost in all the talk.
3. Use words like "I" or "we" instead of "the district" or "the administration".
4. If you don't want something quoted – don't say it. Don't speak "off the record".
5. Talk to the interest of your public. What would *you* want to know if you were one of them?
6. Don't lose your temper or hold grudges. Some reporters will push you to the edge trying to get their story and out of frustration you may blurt out something you wished you hadn't. Stay calm. Remember the old country saying: "Never get into a fight with a pig. You both end up dirty – but the pig likes it."
7. If you don't like the words used by the reporter to describe something, don't repeat them. If you do, he or she may use them in the article. Rephrase the words into the language YOU want to use.
8. Questions seeking a simple yes or no answer can be tricky. Sometimes you may want to avoid giving a definite yes or no. For example, if the reporter were to ask, "Are there drugs in your school?" Replying "no" may make you appear ignorant in the eyes of the public that has a perception that there are drugs in school. Replying "yes" may stir up a new concern on the public's part fearing that you are not doing enough if you know there are drugs. A good answer may be, "Drugs are a pervasive problem in our society. Schools often reflect what is happening in society. We are doing everything possible to educate our students about drug abuse prevention."
9. If you don't know the answer, just say so. Don't guess! It's perfectly acceptable to say "I don't know the answer to that, but I'll look into it and get back to you."
10. Tell the whole truth. What could have been a short story often turns into several embarrassing and damaging stories over a longer period of time when the whole truth was not told the first time.

**See also, "Reporter tricks and pitfalls to avoid" at the end of this handbook.*

"Off the record"

Some people feel so comfortable with reporters that they tell the reporter things when they don't think the reporter will actually use that information. They thought they were talking "off the record."

Unless you know the reporter very well and feel it is important to the story that he/she have some necessary background information, don't ask to go off the record or assume you are off the record.

When talking with a reporter assume everything you tell him or her is for the record. This includes any casual remarks, jokes, comments – anything you say may be used in the story. This applies to whether you are talking to the reporter directly or within hearing range of the reporter, before, during or after an interview, whether you are in a hallway, elevator or parking lot and whether or not the reporter is taking notes.

Press releases, press advisories & photo advisories

Do you want media coverage for a program or event?

The basic tool for getting media attention is the press release. It is generally a simple one- or two-page information sheet that gives the basic facts and is sent to the attention of a reporter at a news desk.

The media will never guarantee they will cover your event. It often depends on what may be happening in the news that particular day.

Why use a press release?

A press release is a great tool for letting the community know of an upcoming event, for giving recognition for a job well done and for capturing the attention of a reporter in hopes of getting media coverage either in the newspaper or on television.

Getting a reporter to attend an event can be difficult. A reporter is attracted to NEWS. If your press release is about something out of the ordinary, or has mass appeal (i.e., a great human interest story), you stand a better chance of having a reporter show up at your event. You can also increase your odds of getting a story covered by tying it into a bigger state or national news story. Local reporters are always interested in “the local angle” on bigger news stories.

Television is very selective in that they want to cover news stories that are VISUALLY interesting such as highly emotional people or a colorful, action-packed event. Television reporters are often drawn to stories involving kids. Television also deals in “soundbytes” – eight to ten seconds of a person or thing preceded or followed by a reporter giving most of the information. Exciting to watch if you are close to the organizing getting coverage – but rarely is television coverage in-depth.

Newspapers, on the other hand, cover the news in much more detail. People are often quoted in newspapers, but rarely does the newspaper report everything a person says about a subject – only bits and pieces that the reporter thinks would make for good reading.

Developing a press release

A press release is information you are sending to the newspaper that you want the paper to run as you have written it. There is no guarantee that the paper will print it, but in many cases they will.

Almost always, the information from a press release will be repackaged by a reporter, but it is still very important to check your spelling and grammar before sending the release. Double check the spelling of people's names, phone numbers and dates.

All releases should be on standard 8.5 x 11 inch paper, typed. Get a second opinion to ensure it is easily understood and is not missing any important information.

AT THE TOP OF THE PRESS RELEASE:

- Use your BOCES letterhead or in some way identify where the press release is coming from (name of your program/division/etc.) Include the address and phone number.
- List yourself or someone else who knows something about the event as a contact person. Include a phone number (work/cell) where the reporter can call to get more information if he or she has questions. This information can be separate from the actual text of the release if it is just for the *reporter* to get more information or as part of the text as a last sentence if it is for the *public* to get more information.
- Date the press release.
- Type: “FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE” at the top of the page.

THE TEXT OF THE PRESS RELEASE:

- Stick to the facts: Who?, What?, When?, Where?, How? and Why? Don't try and write a story – that's what the reporter does. Put the most important information (except phone numbers) in the first few sentences.
- Keep the press release short – one page in most cases. If you must use two pages, type "- More -" at the bottom of the first page. At the top left of the second page, identify the topic in a few bold or underlined short words (in case the pages get separated) and then continue the release.
- Leave generous margins so the reporter can make notes in that area.

AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PRESS RELEASE:

- Indicate the end of the press release by typing one of the following accepted symbols/words after the last sentence, two lines down and centered:
 1. ***
 2. -30-
 3. - End -

SENDING OUT A PRESS RELEASE:

- Timing is critical in sending a press release. You must know the last hour (or day) the paper will accept press releases for that day's (or week's) edition. You must also keep your audience in mind. You may want to give your audience one or two weeks notice about the upcoming event so that they can plan in advance.
- If you are sending it to one of the daily papers, try to send it *at least* three days in advance of the time you want it printed.
- Press releases for newspapers are usually mailed or faxed to the NEWS DESK c/o the reporter's name. Depending on the paper, you may also send the release to the CITY DESK or COMMUNITY NEWS DESK.
- Press releases for television stations are usually mailed or faxed to the NEWS ASSIGNMENT EDITOR.
- Most newspapers have information in every issue about where to send press releases. And almost every media outlet has its own Web site that lists this information.

Developing a "press advisory"

A press advisory (vs. a press release) is used when you just want to get a reporter to attend and cover your event. You don't expect the advisory to be printed or broadcast. The format is the same as press release except for the heading of PRESS ADVISORY.

This format may be used, for example, to notify the media that a special speaker will be in your school in the next few days, or a special event will be taking place.

Writing a "photo opportunity advisory"

A photo opportunity advisory is another way of getting the media to attend an event. This will only work if you have something visually unique that would make for an unusual or interesting photo for the newspaper or for television coverage. The format is the same as the press advisory, but in the heading the words PHOTO OPPORTUNITY replace PRESS ADVISORY. Remember to send the release well in advance so a photographer can be assigned to your event.