

RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA

Media Relations Guidelines

These guidelines cover the basics of how to handle contact with the news media. These guidelines also provide information on news media access to students in CCCOE programs.

As a public agency, CCCOE has a responsibility to be open and responsive to information requests from the news media. Public awareness of our agency and its work is vital to our accountability and success. The news media are a major vehicle for communicating with our public.

CCCOE's Communications Office is designated as the agency's principal liaison with the news media. Among its responsibilities, the office:

- Ensures that CCCOE responds to news media inquiries in a timely, honest, and cooperative way
- Works to increase public awareness about CCCOE by promoting media coverage through news releases, "story pitches," and other strategies

The Communications Office has expertise in media relations and weighs each contact to determine the best way to provide information:

In some cases, a Communications Office representative will act as the official media spokesperson on a given issue.

In many — if not most — cases, CCCOE managers and administrators (deputy superintendent, associate superintendents, directors, principals, coordinators) will be called on to act as spokespersons because they have the needed information, knowledge, experience, expertise or perspective. Communications staff works with designated spokespersons to prepare for media interviews as needed.

Communications staff are always available to provide support, consultation, and training in situations involving contact with the news media.

When the Media Call You

A reporter, producer or other news media representative may call your office or site for a number of reasons, for example:

- To get information for a story about CCCOE or one of its programs or schools
- To get information about a CCCOE student or staff member
- To get information or comments for an education news story

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When a news media representative calls your office/site:

All staff should act with courtesy and professionalism when taking calls from the news media. How this call is handled may be the reporter's first impression of CCCOE and may be reflected in any resulting news coverage.

Try to take a media call right away or return the call within 15 minutes. If you can't do this, refer the media representative to the CCCOE Communications Office at (925) 942-3420 or (925) 942-3330. (We don't want news stories involving CCCOE to say that we were unavailable for comment — which is what could happen if we don't return the call!)

When answering or returning the media calls, determine:

- The reporter's name, media outlet, phone, fax, e-mail
- The reporter's deadline
- The subject/intent of the story
- What the reporter wants – information, interview, photo/videotaping, site visit

When referring the media to the Communications Office, please don't say you are not allowed to talk to a reporter or have to get permission to do so. (That would actually violate your constitutional right to free speech!) Instead, tell the reporter: "Our agency policy is to refer all media inquiries to our Communications Office. You can reach them at (925) 942-3420."

Don't let a reporter compel you to answer questions on the spot. It is always beneficial to prepare for an interview to provide accurate information. Reschedule the interview for a mutually agreeable time so you can gather information and prepare a response.

Work with the Communications Office to determine the appropriate response.

Inform the Communications Office as soon as possible if and when you have contact with the news media.

Ensure that the reporter's deadline is met.

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When the Media Show Up

A reporter or camera crew may show up unannounced at a CCCOE school site. This is most likely to occur in crisis situations at the site or in the community. Or it could occur if the media learn about an event at your site from another source.

When dealing with reporters and camera crews who may show up unannounced, use the same general guidelines for handling media calls.

Additional Considerations:

Even if a reporter is on site, you don't have to answer questions on the spot. Reschedule the interview for a mutually agreeable time so you can gather information and prepare a response.

News media representatives have certain rights of access to public schools for legitimate news-gathering purposes. At the same time, school officials have the authority to deny such access when they believe the media's presence is disruptive or interfering with classes or other school activities.

CCCOE encourages site administrators to make every effort to accommodate the reasonable requests of the legitimate news media for access to our schools and sites so long as that access does not disrupt the peaceful conduct of the educational activities.

However, CCCOE students who are under the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court and/or supervision of the Probation Department cannot be interviewed, photographed, or filmed — even on a confidential basis — without prior approval. (See Guidelines on Media Access to Students in CCCOE Programs.)

Special education students have a legal right to maintain confidentiality of the nature of their disability. Members of the media should be requested not to reveal the nature of a student's disability in any news coverage. Ensure that any students to be interviewed or photographed have a signed CCCOE Release form on file.

Mind your manners. Be courteous. Be friendly. But also remember that just as you are on the job, so is the reporter. The reporter, no matter how congenial or affirming, is a colleague in the world of work; doing the work he or she is paid to do. Reporters have three objectives in an interview: facts, context, and quotes. Everything you say and do — including body language, offhand jokes, and so on — may be observed and reported on by the media representative, who is simply looking for ways to do his/her best job: To make the story “come alive” for the audience. Be aware.

RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA (CONTINUED)

Don't educate. The reporter's job is similar to that of a building contractor. He or she is expected to construct something whole and complete using a variety of resources and tools. CCCOE's input to a story is usually just one corner of the foundation, or perhaps one of the timbers. **Don't offer to teach the reporter everything about an issue;** you run the risks of unintentionally :

- **mis**leading/**mis**informing the reporter
- **mis**understanding the questions asked of you (this often occurs when you speak outside your area of expertise or authority)
- Being **mis**understood by the reporter

When You Want to Call the Media

When you believe you have a positive news story to share with the public, contact the Communications Office. The office coordinates CCCOE's media contacts and is the only CCCOE department authorized to distribute news releases or hold news conferences.

Please do not call a reporter directly without first consulting with the Communications Office.

Contact Communications at least two weeks in advance of events you want to publicize.

A communications specialist will work with you to gather information and determine if the how the news media should be contacted. The specialist will use measures similar to those used by editors and reporters to determine if your story is newsworthy, for example:

Is it about something new/unusual/a first? Is this a new approach to solving problems? Is this a new way of doing things?

Is this story interesting and relevant to the public who reads the newspaper, listens to the radio or watches TV? Editors and reporters will want to know why their readers, listeners, and viewers should care about the story — not why it's important to CCCOE.

Is this story timely? Is it tied to an issue/event currently in the news?

Some news items may be more appropriate for internal publicity, such as through CCCOE published newsletters and web pages. These includes the quarterly *Circuit* newsletter distributed to all CCCOE staff, and other newsletters produced by CCCOE's department and programs.

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Media Interviewing Tips

- Identify 2-3 key messages you want to deliver and stick to them.
- Use anecdotes and facts to illustrate your points.
- Target your messages to your most important audience, i.e. parents, community, school districts.
- Be brief and to the point. For broadcast interviews, try to convey your key messages in 15 seconds or less. Use short, snappy, colorful quotes.
- Your responses should stand on their own. Speak in complete sentences since the reporter's question is rarely included in the story.
- Acknowledge the reporter's questions and bridge to your messages.
- Use plain language. Don't use acronyms, jargon, and "educationese."
- Provide brief, succinct background materials.
- Be honest, open, and cooperative. Never, never lie.
- Anticipate difficult questions.
- Don't ask to review or approve the story before it airs/is printed.
- Ask the reporter to identify you and your program as being affiliated with the Contra Costa County Office of Education.
- Never say "no comment." It sounds like you're hiding something. If necessary, explain why it is not appropriate or possible for you to answer the question.
- Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." If it is not your area of expertise, say so. But do find out the answer or point the reporter to another source for the information.
- Never speak disparagingly of anyone, not even in jest. Don't assign blame or pass the buck. Stick to what you know and what your organization is doing. Don't fight your battles through the media. If you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything. Remind the reporters that professionals can differ in opinion but that does not mean they should attack each other in the media.
- Don't raise issues you don't want to see in print or on the news.
- Never speak to a reporter "off the record" – unless you want it on the record.

Do not:

- Embarrass or argue with a reporter
- Tell the news organization which reporter you prefer

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- Demand that your remarks not be edited
- Insist that an adversary not be interviewed
- Lie or cloud the truth
- Demand that an answer you've given not be used
- State that what you are about to say is off the record or not attributable to you

Guidelines on Media Access to Students in CCCOE Programs

Students in Juvenile Court Schools

CCCOE serves hundreds of minors in institutional settings who are under the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court and supervision of the Probation Department.

The Court protects the interest of minors under its jurisdiction by ensuring confidentiality of records, documents, and information about their involvement in the justice system. Such records include news stories (print and broadcast), videos, and articles about the minors' participation in programs connected with the justice system – such as Court and Community Schools.

As a partner with the Court and Probation, CCCOE takes seriously the obligation to protect our students' confidentiality rights.

Any news media contact with minors in JCCS programs, activities, and events must be approved in advance as outlined below. **The following rules also apply to CCCOE staff who wish to videotape or publish photos/articles involving these minors.**

The CCCOE Communications Office can assist members of the news media and staff in securing the necessary approvals and clearances outlined below.

For minors removed from the physical custody of the parent/legal guardian and under the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court and supervision of the Probation Department (e.g. students in juvenile hall, Orin Allen Center):

Anyone who wishes to interview, photograph, videotape, or voice record a minor (or wishes to invite media coverage of an activity involving minors) must send a formal request seeking permission from the Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Court in advance. The request must describe the purpose of the contact and the intended audience for the final product.

Written consent of students and their parents/guardians is required.

Once a formal request is received, the Court secures approval from Probation and attorneys as necessary. The Court usually will grant a limited waiver of confidentiality allowing media access but prohibiting minors' identities from being revealed.

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- Photos/videos cannot show faces, profiles or any other identifiable feature of minors.
- Names of minors must remain confidential and cannot be used in final products.
- Confidential information about a minor's case, including the conduct which led to his or her involvement with the Juvenile Court, cannot be published, broadcast, divulged or used for any purpose.

Allow at least 10 working days for this approval.

All Other Students in CCCOE Programs (Special Education,* Community School, ROP, YDS)

Members of the media engaged in legitimate news gathering on a public school campus may speak to, photograph and film students without prior permission from parents.

However, it is the policy of the CCCOE to require a Parent/Guardian Photo/Video/Website Release Form to be signed for any planned media coverage of our students.

Students may decline to speak to the media and may refuse to be interviewed, filmed, or photographed. Also, parents have the right to withhold permission for their children to be interviewed, filmed, or photographed. For this reason, it may be helpful to have these parents sign an "opt-out" (News Media Access to Students) form at the beginning of the school year. If parents have expressed either orally or in writing, that they do not want their children speaking to or being photographed by the media, then the school must honor this request.

Time permitting, a site administrator may wish to inform parents when media visits will take place. A simple written statement can be given to parents (and translated into the appropriate languages) prior to the media coming onto your campus.

Parent/Guardian Photo/Video/Website Release Form for CCCOE Uses

Frequently, CCCOE will want to include students in our print, video, audio, and electronic communications. Please ensure that a signed Parent/Guardian Photo/Video/Website Release Form is on file for any student included in CCCOE-produced publications, videos, web pages, and other communications.

The Parent/Guardian Photo/Video/Website Release form is not applicable to students in Juvenile Court and Community Schools.

Note: According to a California Attorney General opinion dated August 26, 2002: "Members of the news media may not attend a child's individualized education program [IEP] meeting as observers even though their attendance has the consent of the parents." The opinion also says, "members of the news media, as well as members of the public, may attend the next level in the process at the discretion of the parents... which is a [due process] hearing the parents may request if they disagree with any part of the IEP that the public agency intends to implement." (Source: California Department of Education)

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Media Access Rights in California

- News media have almost blanket rights to come into schools under the Constitution and state laws.
- Penal Code allows banning outsiders from campus, but specifically exempts reporters.
- Education Code says you may exclude the media if they are “disrupting normal educational operations.”
- Always escort media while on campus.
- Photo releases are not needed for “news,” but are required under any circumstances for specified student populations. Don’t take any chances; call Communications for direction and a photo/website release form.
- Under the Freedom of Information Act, we may be required to supply media “public record” information about the student or staff member, such as access to yearbook photos. Media should be urged to get in touch with family for photos.
- Ask that media representatives sign in first at the school office.
- Issue “press badges” or passes to ensure first point of contact and to identify reporters.
- A “command center” approach will help contain a crisis situation and improve communications with media.
- Police may exclude/restrict access by the media at a crime scene or a natural disaster.

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Anatomy of a News Release

You have about five seconds to get an editor's attention and 15 seconds to persuade them that what you have to say is important enough to be on the assignment schedule.

- A. The release isn't the story! It just gets them to call you about the story.
- B. Remember the distinction between print and electronic news media.
- C. Always date the release. Embargoes rarely work and may hurt you. Once it's out, it's out!
- D. Don't forget a school contact name and phone numbers, including after hours.
- E. One sided, limit to two pages, double space typed.
- F. Leave room at top or sides for notes. They write on the release.
- G. Be brief, no jargon, give full names and titles, small paragraphs.
- H. Avoid adjectives.
- I. Use a headline, not just "News Release." Make sure that your school/agency name is the most prominent at the top of the page. They get thousands of pieces of paper labeled "News Release."
- J. Play "what's my Line?" by using the five Ws and one H (Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How.)
- K. Keep the clips to see how you got covered. Learn from your mistakes and check their style.
- L. KISS: Keep It Short and Simple.
- M. Mailing it isn't enough. Try email or FAX and above all, follow with a call. It's best if it goes to a specific person by name. Keep your contact list updated.
- N. Make sure that you send the release both to the education reporters and the assignment or news editors.

Courtesy Tom DeLapp, Communication Resources for Schools

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The Basics of News Media Relations in an Emergency/Crisis Situation

Be First. Be Right. Be Credible.

Build Trust and Credibility by Expressing:

- Empathy and caring
- Competence and expertise
- Honesty and openness
- Commitment and dedication

Top Tips:

- Don't over reassure
- Acknowledge uncertainty
- Express wishes ("I wish I had answers")
- Explain the process in place to find answers
- Acknowledge people's fear

As a spokesperson:

- Know your organization's policies
- Stay within the scope of your responsibilities
- Don't answer questions that are not within the scope of your organizational responsibility
- Tell the truth. Be transparent
- Embody your agency's identity

Pitfalls for spokespersons:

- Remember that jargon complicates communication and implies arrogance
- Use humor cautiously or not at all
- Refute negative allegations without repeating them
- Use positive or neutral terms
- Don't assume you've made your point. Ask
- At all costs, avoid one-liners, clichés, and off-the-cuff comments
- Discuss what you know, not what you think
- Do not express personal opinions
- Don't show off

What spokespersons should know when talking through the media:

- Your job is not their job, respect the differences, look for the mutual goals.
- Go into any media interview with a purpose. Have a message to deliver. If you don't, you don't have a reason to do the interview.
- Make sure the reporter gets your name and title right, as well as that of other COE personnel.

RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA (CONTINUED)

General media interview pitfalls:

- Don't let a reporter put words in your mouth. The reporter may use inflammatory or emotionally laden words. Don't repeat them.
- If the question contains leading or loaded language, reframe the question to eliminate the language and then answer the question.
- Don't assume the reporter has it right if he or she claims that someone has lodged an allegation. Don't react to new information a reporter gives you. Instead, say, "I have not heard that" or "I would have to verify that before I could respond." Don't let the reporter start a fight.
- If a reporter leaves a microphone in your face after you've answered the question, stop. Do not answer the question again or add to your answer. Instead, say, "That was my answer. Do you have another question for me to address?" Say it matter of factly, without sarcasm or annoyance.
- There is no such thing as "off the record." Background and deep background do not mean you won't be quoted. Do not say anything before, during, or at the conclusion of an interview that you are not prepared to see in print the next day. The interview hasn't ended until the reporter and all equipment is out the door and long gone.
- Anticipate questions. Work with your communications director or administrator to anticipate as many expected questions as possible and draft the answers. Nuances count. A word change here or there may make the difference in how well your answer is received. Put the answer on paper (it will usually be too long to give in public) and then find the bottom line – what is the point you want to make? What rings true and doesn't sound evasive? That's your 30-second answer.
- Make your point first. Have prepared message points. Try to say it in 30 seconds and in fewer than 90 words.
- Don't fake it. If you don't know the answer, say so. If it's not in your area of expertise, say so. Commit to getting the answer.
- Never speak disparagingly of anyone, not even in jest. Don't assign blame or pass the buck. Stick to what you know and what your organization is doing. Don't fight your battles through the media. If you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything. Remind reporters that professionals can differ in opinion but that does not mean they should attack each other in the media.
- Don't buy in to hypothetical questions. Reframe the question in a way that addresses legitimate concerns of the public without being sensational or "entertainment."
- Record sensitive interviews. Be sure the reporter knows you are doing it.

RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA (CONTINUED)

- Do not ask reporters to review their articles or interviews. Offer to clarify information for them as they prepare their piece. If a reporter shows you the piece, understand that he or she expects you to correct errors in fact – not viewpoints that may differ from yours.
- Break down multiple-part questions and answer each part separately.
- Don't raise issues you don't want to see in print or on the news.
- Don't say "No comment" to a reporter's question. Instead, state why you can't answer that question. Say that the matter is under investigation, the organization has not yet made a decision, or simply that you are not the appropriate person to answer that question.

Media opportunity or press conference tips:

- Determine in advance who will answer questions about specific subject matters.
- Keep answers short and focused – no longer than two minutes.
- Assume every mic is live – all the time.

In-person interview tips:

- Know who will be conducting the interview.
- Know the subjects the reporter wants to cover and limit the interview to those subjects.
- Caution the reporter when you are not the right person to answer a question.
- Know the format and duration of the interview. You can set limits.
- Ask who else will be interviewed or has been interviewed.

DO NOT:

- Embarrass or argue with a reporter.
- Tell the news organization which reporter you prefer.
- Demand that your remarks not be edited.
- Insist that an adversary not be interviewed.
- Lie or cloud the truth.
- Demand that an answer you've given not be used.
- State that what you are about to say is off the record or not attributable to you.

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Telephone interview tips:

- Know who is on the other end of the line.
- Ask if you are being recorded.
- Ask when and where the information will be used.
- Obtain the reporter's phone number before the interview begins. You may need to call back if the call is interrupted or if you need to provide updated information.
- Spell out difficult names/technical terms/phrases.

At the outset, limit the time available for the interview. Give yourself an out, such as a pending meeting. You have an obligation to answer important questions from the media, but you do not have an obligation to explore every facet of the incident or to do reporters' homework. Send them to web-based or print materials to save time. Be certain to ask reporters for feedback to ensure that they understand your points.

- Go to a quiet room.
- Don't allow distractions.
- Stand up. It strengthens your voice and makes you alert.

Keep **key messages** at hand. Repeat them often so reporters know these are what you believe are important.

Reporters are not adversaries. They are also not your friends. Some reporters will use well-known techniques to attempt to get a reaction from you. Adjust your interview style accordingly.

- **Sensational or unrelated questions:** Answer the question in as few words as possible without repeating the sensational elements. Then return to your key messages. Here are a few recommended "bridges" back to what you want to say:
 - "What I think you are really asking is..."
 - "The overall issue is..."
 - "What's important to remember is..."
 - "It's our policy to not discuss this issue, but what I can tell you is..."
 - "What I'm really here to discuss..."
 - "Your readers/viewers need to know..."

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- **Character attack:** Don't lock horns with an adversary during an interview. Do question the science, issues, or goals, but not someone's character. "I can't speak for Dr. X. You'll have to ask him or her, but what I can address is..."
- **Machine-gun questioning:** Reporter fires rapid questions at you. Pacing is quick. Reporter interrupts your response. You respond, "Please let me answer this question." Control the pace. Take time to think.
- **Mic Feeding and pausing:** You've given a good answer on a controversial issue. The reporter pauses and the camera continues to roll. Stay on your agenda. Be aware of nonverbal cues (deer in the headlight look, fidgeting). Don't sweat. It's the reporter's job to fill the air time. Dead air doesn't make scintillating viewing – unless you're reacting non verbally. Relax.
- **Hot mic:** It's always on. Always – including during "testing."
- **Sensational question with an A or B dilemma:** Use positive words, correct the inaccuracies without repeating the negative, and reject A or B as neither are valid. Explain, "There's actually another alternative you may not have considered," and give your message point.
- **Surprise prop:** The reporter attempts to hand you a report or supposedly contaminated item. Don't take it. If you take it, you own it. React by saying, "I'm familiar with that report, and what I can say is" or "I'm not familiar with that report, but what is important is," and then go to your key message.

Stay on message:

- "What's important is to remember..."
- "I can't answer that question, but I can tell you..."
- "Before I forget, I want to tell your viewers..."
- "Let me put that in perspective..."

The quickest way to publicly fall flat on your face as an organization is to not be able to release accurate information quickly.

Spokespersons don't just read a statement; they are the statement.

The spokesperson brings the organization to life. They literally embody the organization and give it its human identity. A spokesperson takes the organization from an "it" to a "we," and is the conduit to various audiences so that the organization does not have to rely entirely on the written word.

A spokesperson must be perceived as trustworthy and credible. Research indicates that being perceived as empathetic and caring provides greater opportunity for your message to be received and acted upon. Express empathy or caring within the first 30 seconds. Besides empathy, credibility is built on expressions of competence and expertise (truly "knowing your stuff"), honesty and openness, and commitment and dedication.

Courtesy of: Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

