

**CONTRA COSTA COUNTY  
OFFICE OF EDUCATION**

# **COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNICATIONS PLAN**

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Contra Costa County Office of Education  
Comprehensive Communications Plan

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# INTRODUCTION

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In its efforts to foster productive relationships and effective communication with its employees, students, parents, and the broader community, the Contra Costa County Office of Education (CCCOE) has developed a Comprehensive Communications Plan that incorporates *New Standards for the School Public Relations Profession* from the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA).

NSPRA defines educational public relations/communications as follows:

Educational public relations/communications is a planned, systematic management function, designed to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization. It relies on a comprehensive, two-way communication process involving both internal and external publics with the goal of stimulating better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments, and needs of the organization.

Educational public relations/communications programs assist in interpreting public attitudes, identify and help shape policies and procedures in the public interest, and carry on involvement and information activities which earn public support and understanding.

The following components of the CCCOE Comprehensive Communications Plan apply agency-wide, involving not just the Communications Office, but the way in which we all interact with employees, students, parents, news media, elected officials and the community at large. It is our goal that this plan, together with our involvement in Continuous Quality in Education (CQE) supports a culture in the CCCOE of proactive, customer-focused quality service.

# **COMMUNICATIONS PLAN**

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## ***Governing Board –***

The Contra Costa County Board of Education understands and models its policy-setting responsibilities on actions that are in the best interests of students and their achievement. The Board:

- Adopts and ensures periodic review of policies and regulations for the CCCOE.
- Has in its Bylaws a Code of Ethics that includes modeling respect, civility, and integrity (Section 9271).
- Builds relationships with the Superintendent and staff based on mutual trust and respect.
- Seeks input from CCCOE stakeholders before developing policy and clearly communicates its actions and the reasons for them.
- Recognizes that the Board, Superintendent, and Leadership Team have separate and distinct roles and responsibilities. The Board is responsible for making policy and the Superintendent, with the Leadership Team, is responsible for translating such policies into a plan of action that will demonstrate performance and achieve results.

## ***Communication Policy –***

The County Board has adopted written policies to guide the CCCOE's communications and public relations efforts. These policies can be found on the CCCOE website under Board policies, Series 0000, Sections 0000, 0100, 0200, 0300, 0400, 0500. They include:

- A policy that commits the organization to providing comprehensive communications and public relations in an open and honest way that meets the needs and desires of all internal and external publics and in accordance with legal, regulatory, fiscal, and ethical requirements.
- A policy regarding the release of information about individual staff, students, or clients.
- A policy that describes public involvement in the agency's decision-making.
- A policy that enables employees, parents, and others to appeal policy or administrative decisions.
- Policies that require the CCCOE to learn what employees and customers want to know and to provide that information in various ways.
- A community involvement policy that encourages interested citizens to review the CCCOE's vision, mission, goals, and objectives; and to become educated about and offer opinions on issues that may require action in the future.

# **COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)**

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## ***Communication Procedures –***

- The CCCOE has written procedures to implement the Board’s policies and to provide clear direction for staff roles in public relations and communications.
- Procedures are in place that outlines various communication responsibilities in crisis situations (see pages 16-29).
- Procedures clarify a policy of openness and honesty in interacting with the news media. Job descriptions clarify staff responsibilities in communicating with and through the news media.
- Existing procedures describe formal and informal methods of communicating with CCCOE employees.
- Procedures are in place that describe formal and informal methods of communicating with parents and the broader community.
- Existing procedures describe how the CCCOE seeks the views of employees and customers on a regular basis.

## ***Communications Office –***

Provides communications, partnership and community relations services, which increase understanding of, satisfaction with, and support for public education including CCCOE and school district programs.

- The Chief Communications Officer (CCO) is a member of the Superintendent’s Cabinet, directly accountable to the Superintendent and involved with the strategic management processes of the CCCOE.
- Strategic management processes includes communication programs for interacting with key publics, especially those who might be affected by a decision.
- Part of the CCO’s responsibilities include leadership for an issues management process to ensure that potential problems and issues are identified and dealt with in a strategic fashion.
- The budget for communications/public relations is sufficient to achieve program goals.
- The CCO ensures that educators and the community are aware of trends and other forces that may impact the school system, students and the broader community.
- The CCO counsels the Board, the Superintendent, other CCCOE administrators and staff, and upon request, school district personnel, in public relations and communications strategies.

## **COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)**

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- Professional requirements for the Communications staff include:
- Commit to improving educational opportunities for all.
- Commit to professional performance and ethical behavior as described in the NSPRA Code of Ethics. (See page 13)
- A minimum of a bachelor's degree from an accredited university or equivalent experience in the field.
- A comprehensive working knowledge of internal and external public relations and communications programs for an educational organization.
- A mastery of communications skills.
- A thorough knowledge and understanding of communications theory and research.
- Appropriate training for their responsibilities.
- The ability to provide expertise and advice to top management.
- Participation in public relations seminars, conferences, workshops, and institutes.
- Refining their skills and expanding their knowledge by reading, researching, writing, speaking, and consulting in education, public relations, and communications.

### ***Training –***

Provide communications and public relations training opportunities.

- Training opportunities are provided for CCCOE administrators in effective public relations practices, including interaction with the news media.
- Opportunities are provided for teachers and other staff to become effective public relations ambassadors for the CCCOE, and to deal with students, parents and others in ways that promote their involvement, understanding and cooperation.
- The CCCOE works in conjunction with other county and non-profit agencies to provide regular workshops and trainings for emergency and crisis communication, media relations, customer service, CQE and other topics of interest. (Public Information Network)

# **COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)**

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## **Research –**

Before major communication and public relations efforts are initiated, each CCCOE department or program determines relevant factors relating to the demography and opinions of the community and its various components. (See Template for Developing a Marketing/Communication Plan at [http://www.cocoschools.org/supe/com\\_plan.html](http://www.cocoschools.org/supe/com_plan.html))

- The CCCOE's goal setting is based on research and direct involvement with stakeholders to determine their educational priorities.
- The CCCOE's public relations and communications efforts are research-based (i.e., our planning and strategies are based on research that indicates various audiences' perceptions, desires, interests, opinions, and needs for information and involvement).
- The CCCOE regularly elicits both quantitative and qualitative information through means such as formal and informal surveys, advisory councils, and focus groups that involve both internal and external publics.

## **Planning –**

The communication and public relations efforts are planned on a systematic (annual) basis to support the achievement of the CCCOE's Strategic Plan and its goals and objectives.

- The plan has the approval of the Superintendent. (See Strategic Plan focus areas - page 15, and each department's annual goals and objectives in the CCCOE Budget binder.)
- The plan focuses on meeting the goals of the CCCOE and ultimately improving education, and enhancing student achievement.
- The plan identifies the needs of target publics and uses research data to identify key messages and strategies for delivering those messages.
- Communication plans for specific program changes or initiatives are developed in conjunction with the staff responsible for them.
- Communication plans identify the various publics who will be affected and the strategies for reaching them.
- Communication plans include measurable goals for behavior change or accomplishment, deadlines, responsibilities, resources, and strategies. (See Template for Developing a Marketing/Communications Plan at [http://www.cocoschools.org/supe/com\\_plan.html](http://www.cocoschools.org/supe/com_plan.html))

## **COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)**

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- Plans are reviewed regularly to ensure that communication efforts remain relevant, are on schedule, and are adjusted whenever necessary to reach planned goals or to deal with emerging needs and opportunities.
- The Comprehensive Communications Plan aligns with the current Strategic Plan.

### **Communicating –**

CCCOE communicates with all publics using a variety of channels based on research and planning, and are appropriate to the communications goals.

- CCCOE and its departments' communications include opportunities for target publics to obtain further information and to respond if desired.
- All communication is timely, meets the needs of the target publics, and uses language and format that are appropriate for particular audiences.
- The language, format, and general presentation of all efforts are planned so that they communicate effectively.

### **Employees –**

The CCCOE has procedures and strategies that stimulate regular, two-way communication with all employees. Those include:

- *E-Circuit*, an electronic communication newsletter that provides information employees need to be well informed and to do their jobs effectively. This publication, distributed to every employee, is available in electronic version.
- New programs or initiatives are planned with staff input and are communicated in appropriate ways to each employee group.
- E-mail, voice mail, intranet, and other electronic systems that allow for easy communication with and among employees, accompanied by procedures for the appropriate use of the system(s). (See the *Employee Handbook*, *Employee Resource Guide*, *Positive Communications and Stylebook Guide*, available in print and electronic versions)
- A comprehensive crisis plan for the CCCOE, its programs, the Stewart Building, and individual school sites that is up-to-date.

## **COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)**

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- An ongoing program that recognizes the efforts of individual staff and CCCOE departments and thanks them for their contributions. (*E-Circuit, website.*)
- An up-to-date Employee Handbook and Employee Resource Guide with CCCOE policies and procedures are conveniently available to all employees. (Print and electronic versions available at [http://www.cocoschools.org/stewart/resources/res\\_new.html](http://www.cocoschools.org/stewart/resources/res_new.html).)
- A directory – available to all employees – that contains the CCCOE structure; names, titles, and telephone numbers of personnel in each department; and how to access needed services. (website for searchable Public Schools Directory available at <http://www.cocoschools.org/directory>), printed version, various other department directories available, Stewart site directory)
- A variety of vertical and horizontal two-way communication opportunities within the CCCOE structure.
- Regular meetings of employees with supervisors where a spirit of openness encourages questions and suggestions for improving education and/or dealing with other work-related issues.
- New employee orientations to acquaint them with the CCCOE's goals, structure, and culture; their specific job responsibilities.
- Systematic, annual plans for each department of the CCCOE, spelling out strategies for communicating with employees and with the organization's many constituents.
- Regular opportunities for employees with similar responsibilities to meet and discuss issues of common interest.
- Regular training for various employee groups addressing their public relations and communications roles in the CCCOE and within the community. (Customer Service training, CQE)
- Regular meetings of the Superintendent with representatives from various groups within the CCCOE to discuss matters of mutual interest.
- Formal and informal methods for asking employees, at least annually, to evaluate the agency and its departments on the availability, relevance, and responsiveness of communication efforts. (*E-Circuit* survey)

## **COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)**

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### ***Students –***

The CCCOE has practices and procedures that encourage sound communication with students and encourage their involvement in their school. These include:

- Student handbooks. (Court and Community Schools, for example, has a handbook that is distributed to and reviewed with every student to help them understand school rules as well as academic; behavioral, and other expectations.)
- Involvement of students in ways that will make it possible for them to contribute to the CCCOE's strategic goals and initiatives.
- Information that is communicated to students and their parents/guardians about various topics including safety.
- A safe, welcoming learning climate, with staff that encourage students to achieve their best.
- Principals and teachers who communicate regularly with students about the school environment and issues of concern to both students and staff.

### ***Parents –***

The CCCOE has practices and procedures that encourage regular, two-way communication and help to develop appropriate mutual expectations between parents and their schools or programs.

- Regular school communication vehicles exist to communicate important events, dates, and news about the school, staff, and student accomplishments.
- Regular opportunities are provided for principals and teachers to meet fact-to-face with parents.
- All communication and interaction with parents is based on mutual respect and an attitude of true partnership in their children's education.
- Parents and others in the community are encouraged to volunteer at the school in ways that are important for students. There is a set of guidelines for volunteers and school staff, that regularly recognize the contributions of volunteers.
- Teachers and parents receive guidelines for holding productive parent-teacher conferences.
- School staff is accessible to respond to parents' questions, inquiries, or ideas.
- A parent-complaint procedure exists to ease the resolution of problems at the lowest possible level.

## **COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)**

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- In addition to regular reports, teachers are encouraged to communicate regularly with parents about each student's educational progress. Well-established, effective procedures exist for communicating and resolving concerns about a student's behavior or education progress.
- The CCCOE gives support and encouragement to related parent and community organizations.
- Parents are surveyed annually to evaluate the school climate, program and communication efforts.

### **Community –**

The CCCOE has regular, two-way communication with various segments of the community.

- CCCOE leadership and other employees are encouraged to belong to and participate actively in civic and service organizations.
- The Superintendent maintains regular, two-way communication with business, civic and religious leaders, and other influential members of the community.
- The Superintendent maintains a key communicator network and uses it for regular communications with its members, inviting them to contact him for information or to alert it to misinformation and rumors.
- Community members are regularly sought to serve on CCCOE and departmental advisory committees.
- The CCCOE uses multiple channels of communication to reach citizens who do not have children in the schools. The Chief Communications Officer is accessible to and visible to the community.
- The CCCOE has a website that is well-constructed, user-friendly, and contains timely information for use by staff, parents, and community members, and helps recruit future employees.
- The CCCOE makes regular efforts to communicate with citizens of various cultures who are not fluent in English to seek their involvement, input, and support.
- The CCCOE seeks partnerships with local businesses that provide mentors and other support to students and their schools and other CCCOE programs.
- Community views are sought in periodic public opinion surveys.

## **COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)**

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### ***News Media –***

The CCCOE has policies and procedures that promote good communication with the news media.

- Personnel in the Communications Office have a complete list of local and regional news media outlets and reporters, and make information about the CCCOE available to the news media on a regular basis.
- CCCOE policies and procedures support responding to news media inquiries in a timely fashion, designation of a spokesperson or spokespersons (such as during a crisis), confidentiality as well as the public release of information, publication of student names and photographs, and notification of all public meetings and events (see pages 16-29).
- Personnel in the Communications Office conduct periodic in-service training for staff in news media relationships, including forums with reporters.
- The staff alerts the news media promptly in the event of any crisis or other newsworthy situation.
- The Superintendent and the Chief Communications Officer periodically meet with the newspaper and other news media editorial boards to alert them to the background and the CCCOE's position on issues that have the potential to become controversial.

### ***Elected Officials –***

The CCCOE recognizes the political leadership exercised by elected officials and makes regular efforts to communicate with them.

- The Superintendent maintains regular, two-way communication with elected officials.
- The CCCOE communicates regularly with local and regional governments and their officials, especially when an educational issue is likely to have an effect on their scope of responsibilities.
- The CCCOE regularly communicates with state legislators and the state education agency to ensure that these officials are well-informed about the CCCOE, its goals and objectives, and any issues that may arise before these groups.

## **COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)**

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### ***Evaluation –***

Every major communication effort is evaluated to determine whether planned goals were met and objectives achieved.

- The CCCOE and its departments engage in both formal and informal evaluations of its communication practices and the levels of satisfaction with its performance.
- Annually developed goals and objectives also include a focus on communication responsibilities.
- Evaluation methods are built in to each element of the CCCOE's annual plan. These evaluations are used to create, modify, or discontinue practices or projects.
- Each of the CCCOE's regular communication channels and vehicles is evaluated periodically to determine its relevance, interest, and ability to communicate important information.

# **SUPERINTENDENT'S FOCUS**

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## ***Superintendent's Focus***

- Fulfill the state constitutional and education code responsibilities of the office of the county superintendent of schools (Contra Costa County Office of Education).
- Provide the leadership necessary to enable every learner the opportunity to achieve academically as successful citizens.
- Advocate on behalf of the students of Contra Costa County.
- Work with the private sector (business and labor) for the advancement of public education.
- Work with other public entities to strengthen public education.
- Provide the leadership to maintain fiscal solvency of all the school districts within the county.
- Implement the CCCOE's Strategic Plan
- Seek opportunities for continuous improvement of the services and programs offered by the CCCOE.

# **NSPRA CODE OF ETHICS**

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## ***NSPRA Code of Ethics –***

The National School Public Relations Association shall have a Code of Ethics for members, as follows:

### ***The education public relations professional shall:***

1. Be guided constantly by pursuit of the public interest through truth, accuracy, good taste and fairness; follow good judgment in releasing information; not intentionally disseminate misinformation or confidential data; avoid actions which lessen personal, professional or organizational reputation.
2. Give primary loyalty to the employing organization, insisting on the right to give advisory counsel in accordance with sound public relations ideas and practices; cooperate with other groups while avoiding conflicts with primary responsibilities; object to untenable policies or activities.
3. Be aware of personal influence, avoiding promises or granting of unprofessional advantages to others; refrain from accepting special considerations for influences on organizational decisions; avoid unauthorized use of organizational facilities, resources or professional services for personal gain or for promotion of the candidacy of aspirants to elected offices; forego derogatory acts or utterances against other professionals.
4. Recognize that effectiveness is dependent upon integrity and regard for ideals of the profession; not misrepresenting professional qualifications; give credit for ideas and words borrowed from others; cooperate with professional colleagues to uphold and enforce this Code.
5. A member shall, as soon as possible, sever relations with any organization or individual if such relationship requires conduct contrary to the articles of this Code.

Adopted: July 1981

## **NSPRA CODE OF ETHICS (CONTINUED)**

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NSPRA also follows the guidelines of the North American Public Relations council, which are listed below.

North American Public Relations Council Uniform Code of Ethics

### ***A member shall:***

1. Conduct his/her professional life in accord with the public interest.
2. Exemplify high standards of honesty and integrity while carrying out dual obligations to a client or employer and to the democratic process.
3. Deal fairly with the public, with past or present clients or employers and with fellow practitioners, giving due respect to the ideal of free inquiry and to the opinions of others.
4. Adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth, avoiding extravagant claims or unfair comparisons and giving credit for ideas and words borrowed from others.
5. Not knowingly disseminate false or misleading information and shall act promptly to correct erroneous communications for which he/she is responsible.
6. Not engage in any practice which has the purpose of corrupting the integrity of channels of communication or the processes of government.
7. Be prepared to identify publicly the name of the client or employer on whose behalf any public communication is made.
8. Not use any individual or organization professing to serve or represent an announced cause, or professing to be independent or unbiased but actually serving another or undisclosed interest.
9. Not guarantee the achievement of specified results beyond the member's direct control.
10. Not represent conflicting or competing interests without the express consent of those concerned, given after a full disclosure of the facts.
11. Not place himself/herself in a position where the member's personal interest is or may be in conflict with an obligation to an employer or client, or others, without full disclosure of such interests to all involved.
12. Not accept fees, commissions, gifts or any other consideration from anyone except clients or employers for whom services are performed without their express consent, given after a full disclosure of the facts.
13. Scrupulously safeguard the confidences and privacy right of present, former and prospective clients or employers.
14. Not intentionally damage the professional reputation or practice of another practitioner

# CCCOE STRATEGIC PLAN

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## **Vision**

Education empowers tomorrow's global citizens.

## **Mission**

Our mission is to be the premier county education agency providing bold leadership, high quality programs, and innovative services.

## **Core Values**

Respect  
Integrity  
Diversity  
Teamwork  
Ethical Leadership  
Creativity/Innovation  
Advocacy for all learners

## **Agency Focus**

1. Provide services and products that support **learning** and **accountability**.
2. Take the lead in creating and sustaining **partnerships** and collaborations that strengthen opportunities for learners.
3. Challenge the status quo by promoting an environment that values **creativity**, encourages risk taking, and supports **innovation**.
4. Recruit, support, and retain outstanding **people** for careers in education that reflect our diverse communities.
5. Provide local and regional high-quality **professional development** to meet student, district, and staff needs.
6. Incorporate **technology** to enhance learning and empower users.
7. Use two-way **communication** to evaluate services and inform data-driven decisions.
8. Advocate for all learners by **promoting** the successes and **explaining** the challenges of public education.

**Joseph A. Ovick, Ed.D.**

Contra Costa County Superintendent of Schools

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# **RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA**

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## ***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

## **RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA (CONTINUED)**

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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.

## **RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA (CONTINUED)**

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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)**

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**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.

## **RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA (CONTINUED)**

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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

## **RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA (CONTINUED)**

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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.

## **RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA (CONTINUED)**

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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)

## **RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA (CONTINUED)**

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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.

## **RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA (CONTINUED)**

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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

## **RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA (CONTINUED)**

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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)**

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### *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)**

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- 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.

## RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA (CONTINUED)

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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..."

## RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA (CONTINUED)

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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

