

— THE GOVERNOR JOHN ENGLER —
CENTER FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS
— CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY —

media TOOLKIT

In today's environment of instantaneous dissemination of information, it is critical that school leaders and board members are kept up-to-date on media issues that affect their school. The commencement of a new school year is a great time to think about community engagement and media relations. Dealing with the media can seem overwhelming, but a little planning and thought can go a long way. To help you think about ways your team can reach out and strengthen your local relationships, the Center has developed the following toolkit.

In this handout, you will find some recommended strategies to use when responding to news stories or other media issues. It is important to be prepared for negative media stories, but also look for opportunities to highlight the positive impact of your school.

As always, please feel free to contact the Center with questions.

ideas to prepare a **MEDIA STRATEGY**

HAVE A PLAN

Adopting and regularly updating a media policy is the most important step to ensuring the media represents your school appropriately. Simple steps like informing employees about what to say or questions to ask when a reporter contacts the school can make a huge difference in the end.

A solid plan will help employees understand who can talk to the media and what can or cannot be said. The privacy of a student or employee is the foremost concern when working with the news media and names of students should never be released under any circumstances without prior consent.

THINK PROACTIVELY

A media plan should not only include how to REACT to the media, but how your school could be PROACTIVE. Unfortunately, positive news can be buried in the never-ending news cycle. This shouldn't stop you from informing reporters about school events or other community related activities at the school. Reporters are members of your community and excited to highlight positive things happening where they live.

Radio shows or the local television stations are great opportunities to promote your school. In most cases, producers are hungry for fresh perspectives and you make their job easier by providing them with content for their show. Do not be afraid to call and ask for an interview. Make a list of a few things that you want to talk about, but always be ready for a tough question.

INFORM AND EMPOWER YOUR ADMINISTRATION/STAFF

Any time media coverage is anticipated, it is important to communicate internally with your team. Not only should you work to ensure no one is blindsided by media mentions, but you can also mobilize your entire team to work with you to leverage a strong, consistent response to ensure your school is represented in the best light.

Remember that you are a public institution and that all your emails and communications are subject to the Freedom of Information Act. Be professional, courteous and smart in your communications, but make sure your team is "in the loop" at all times.

FAMILIARIZE YOUR TEAM WITH ISSUES AND RESPONSES

Generally, someone who has been interviewed in preparation for a news story will have some sense of the story's direction. The reporter's questions and tone during the interview provide important clues that can be used to help frame a response.

Your team can then come together to craft a template for responding. Known colloquially as "talking points," this template helps your team use consistent and effective messages in responding to media coverage. Once developed, talking points should be shared with those who are likely to engage with the media online, through letters to the editor/op-ed pieces or in follow-up interviews.

It is also important to designate a "street team"—a group of individuals both internal and external to your organization who can respond to the media on your behalf and reinforce your messages. Don't forget local parents and community champions—they are among your best assets. Having a street team primed with information and ready to roll can be of great advantage to you when news stories appear.

ADD YOUR COMMENTS TO THE ARTICLE'S WEB PAGE WHEN IT APPEARS

Many publications offer opportunities for the public to comment on their news stories online. In most instances, these comment threads can be just as instructive as the article itself. The comments are read by reporters and editors and often by other opinion leaders and have tremendous value.

You and your street team need to be ready to add your voice to these comments. Your talking points should be your guide in doing so. At all times, your comments should be professional, courteous and appropriate. Be brief, stick to your messages, respect other points of view, but be absolutely certain to introduce your own!

CONSIDER SENDING ONE OR MORE LETTER(S) TO THE EDITOR OR SUBMITTING A GUEST COLUMN

For members of the public who still choose to get their news the old-fashioned way—in print—you'll want to use the tried-and-true strategy of writing letters to the editor. Whether in response to a news story that ran in a particular publication, or just as a means of building awareness of your viewpoint, a well-written letter to the editor is almost never a bad idea.

For larger and current issues, many newspapers like to publish different perspectives through guest columns. Even if your column is not picked up by a newspaper, it would be an easy addition to your school's blog or newsletter.

Letters should be brief, focused, courteous and timely. As with online comments, stick to your message and be professional.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND OTHER FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites offer fresh, informal ways to communicate with your community. In today's fast-paced world, parents may not have time to read an entire newsletter, so consider making a short video with updates on school events or other news.

Be sure you and your team are plugged in and updating your content often!

MAKE CONTACT WITH YOUR LEGISLATOR

News articles often have policy implications. It's important to make sure your local lawmaker understands your point of view, so he/she will make informed decisions when or if the time comes.

As the school year gets started, it's a natural time to invite your Michigan House and Senate representatives to visit your school and connect with your staff, students and parents. "March is Reading Month" is also an excellent opportunity to invite a legislator to read their favorite book to your school.

It's also a great time for you to visit representatives and senators; many busy lawmakers schedule coffees at local restaurants, and it is a good idea to stop by. You can share information about your school, talk about recent media stories and share ideas in this venue as well.

As in everything, be brief, respectful and professional at all times.

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