

When to Let Your Reporter Colleagues Down Easy and Maintain Relationships

Roundtable Discussion

As a former journalist, I value the importance of being prepared for an interview and being able to deliver a clear, concise and comprehensive message that will move our school division forward.

There are times when it may not make sense to agree to be interviewed or seek out media to clarify an issue from your district.

The most important thing to keep in mind and to use as a guide – **ETHICS**

 **Discussion:** Think about a time when it may have benefited your school division to politely say “no” to a reporter or news organization.

Preliminary Questions to Guide You

- What is your deadline?
- What is the story about so I can make sure I can get you the best person to interview?
- What show or publications is this for? (Sometimes this makes it very easy to say “no” right away)
 - When APS and several other school divisions announced that we were suing the governor, media requests poured in from across the nation. Some organizations that failed to interview us and ran stories without reaching out, make it easier to determine whether it’s worth it.

After understanding the premise of their request, you can either choose to move forward or politely decline an interview or divulge other information.

- Keep in mind that because you choose not to respond to them does not mean they still will not run a story.
- It’s always good practice to regularly remind staff that they should not speak to the media unless they’ve been authorized by someone in the communications department or a school division designee.

When to Politely Say No

- Try to **never** say “no comment”
 - This looks bad and it looks like the school division has something to hide.

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Instead:

- **Learn as much about the reporter or media outlet as possible.** Someone from FOX News and someone from CNN, for example, will run two stories that won't be the same. They each, along with other news outlets, have their own sets of viewers or readers to appeal to.
- **Always call the reporter or organization back no matter what.** Reporters don't like to be "ghosted", especially in broadcast news when they are on tight deadlines. They will remember it. While journalists have their own code of ethics, not responding will fracture the relationship and may end up hurting your school division in the future.
 - When asking staff within your division to help, remind them politely of any deadlines should you continue to grant information or fulfill an interview request.
- **Ask the best person outside of your school division to fulfill their request.** Sometimes you will have nothing to hide at all, but the questions a reporter may be asking are beyond your scope of knowledge. They may be better suited to speak with someone from your county or local health
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- department instead. Reporters will not see this as "ducking an interview" but will be appreciative if you take the time to introduce them to someone they can add to their list of contacts.
- **Ask for written questions.** Answer the questions factually and send them back on deadline. It is okay not to answer some questions. Providing answers to written questions may better help your school division navigate what they are asking.
- **Give a written statement.** If you do not want to comment on their story or provide an interview, consider sending a statement. It is better than saying no comment.

Further Questions to Ask to Gain Clarity

- Will this interview fairly represent my school division?
- Will this interview help to promote my division in a positive way?
- Is this a topic the school division wishes to talk about?
- Is this currently a polarizing topic in the public?
- If we comment, how will people with different perspectives respond?
- Is there new information the school division wants to publicize enough to change community opinion and move the story forward?
- Should our school division join a larger group to release new information?
- Do we need to respond or be part of this story today?
- What do we need to plan and what deliverable (talking points, video, media training, etc) do we need to prepare while we are monitoring the story?



Discussion: Armed with new information to conquer an interview or politely say "no," how might these tactics help your relationships with reporters and news organizations in the future?

