

# Reaching out to the Media on Grade-Level Reading

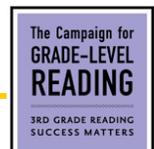
Reaching out to the media is an important component of your communications efforts and can help you reach families, draw attention to early literacy and generate the support of educators and community groups. Even if you decide not to let the media know about your Community Solutions Action Plan or any of the data you've collected, you should be prepared that it might become public anyway, and you should have a strategy for dealing with it.

## What should you do first?

- Prepare a brief, PowerPoint or press release about your community's efforts. If you're releasing any data, work closely with the school district or community-based organization to make sure there are no surprises.
- Be prepared to suggest solutions as well as discussing the problems.
- Think about your audience: Who needs to know about this and what do they need to know?
- Prepare a message box and practice the key messages you want to convey
- Identify who should talk to the media: the mayor's office, school official, teacher, parent, nonprofit organization or foundation leaders.
- Find schools that are beating the odds and direct reporters to see what they're doing there. Work with officials there to make sure they're prepared for media attention and have proper permissions and releases.

## What tools are used for releasing news?

- A **pitch note** offers an idea for a feature story with a human interest angle.
- A **press release** covers basic facts, is brief and accurate, reads like a news story, is free of jargon and clichés, and contains provocative, colorful quotes. Lead off with the information that you would like to see as the focus of any media coverage.
- A **media advisory** is similar but is used to alert reporters to an event you would like them to cover.
- A **letter to the editor** responds to news articles or events.
- An **op ed** is an opinion piece to express a position on a topic.
- An **editorial board meeting** is used to tell the paper about a problem and ask them to write an editorial.



## Writing a pitch note

- Have a specific reporter or editor in mind, and send the note to that person. If possible look at past stories on related topics and refer to one of them. (“Loved your piece on school readiness....”)
- In the first paragraph succinctly explain why the story would be of interest and the essential information.
- Note if you are offering this reporter the first chance at this story.
- Provide all contact information.
- Follow up via email or phone call.

## What steps do I take to issue a release or advisory? How do I get media to an event?

- Create a media list. Look online and/or call your local newspaper, radio and TV stations and ask who covers education, who covers community news and events, and who is the education editor. Get names, e-mails and phone numbers.
- E-mail these key contacts your press release or media advisory. Be sure to provide enough notice for editors and producers to plan.
- News is active and staffs are small - be sure to follow up. Call mid-morning, and be prepared to offer to call back if the reporter is busy working on a deadline.
- Consider the calendar. Newsrooms are often lightly staffed and looking for stories right after holiday weekends and in early August. So time your releases accordingly.
- Prepare in advance and practice your pitch message. Get to the point quickly with a straightforward message. Keep it to no more than three points. Use clear, concise language.

## Handling the media and managing media at an event

- Be sensitive to deadlines, return calls promptly.
- Have material on hand to help tell the story – press kits with copies of the release, brochures, key statistics, etc.
- Be prepared in advance with the right students, staff and parents who can be interviewed. Review talking points in advance. (Get releases signed in advance by parents.)
- Anticipate difficult questions that might be asked and practice concise answers. If you have chronic absence or school readiness data by school campus, reporters may want to write comparison stories. Think through whether you want to release all your data.
- Frame local issues in a national context and stress the leadership role your city is taking in addressing the problem head on.
- Be candid and honest. Don’t say, “No comment.” Don’t argue with reporters.
- Assume everything you say is on the record.
- Be prepared to offer other sources

## Writing a letter to the editor

- Search your local paper for guidelines on submitting letters to the editor.
- Look out for opportunities to respond to stories on education, youth, and early childhood in your community.
- Respond quickly, if possible the same day the article appears.
- Reference the title, date and author of the original piece in the opening sentence of your letter.
- Stay brief (typically 150 words) and put the most important information up front. Suggest what the writer should have said.
- Include your full contact information.
- Avoid bashing the reporter or editorial writer (even if they deserve it.)

## Writing an op ed

- Search your local paper for guidelines on submitting op eds.
- Lead with your main point, be creative but succinct.
- Include recommendations for solving the problem.
- Include a real story about a school that's beating the odds
- Include data that helps tell the story.
- Have a strong close and a specific, clear ask or call to action.
- Include contact information at the end, including phone number or email address

## Arranging an editorial board meeting

- Call your newspaper and ask for the individual in charge of scheduling editorial board meetings. (In a big city, you may be put in touch with the education editor or writer.)
- Bring a small number of people (2-3) to the meeting.
- Prepare a few key talking points and know the latest news around your issue, particularly if the paper has covered it. Think about what you'd like an editorial to say, and then plan your conversation around those points. Don't be surprised to be pulled off course, though.
- Have a specific ask and make sure that is very clear.
- At the end of the meeting ask whether they intend to write on the issue. If no ask why, and offer assistance if they choose to write in the future.