

Communicating with the Media



ALABAMA
ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL BOARDS



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LIVE

PRESENTERS

**Complete This
Sentence...**

“If you’re not telling your own story....”

“Someone else is!”



The Good News

Today, more than ever, school leaders and districts can tell their own story!

Podcasts

Emails

Apps

Magazines

Text Messages

Newsletters

Push Alerts

Automated

Phone Calls

Social Media

District Produced Videos



Think about it...

***Where do your stakeholders
get their information about
school closures?***



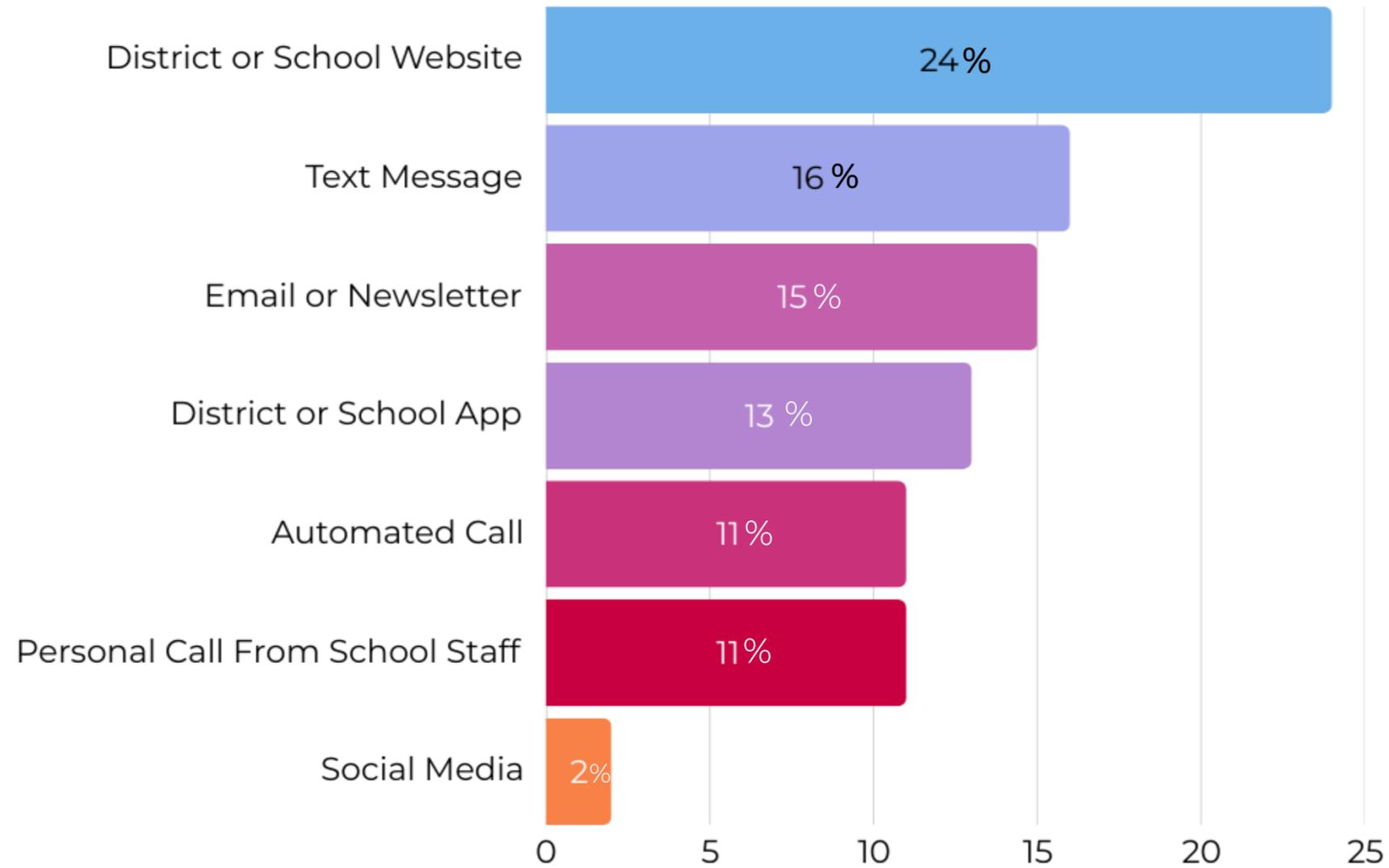
My Weather Closure Priority List

- 1. Principals, District Admin, Board Members***
- 2. Parents - Text, Push Alert, Email, Phone Call***
- 3. Social Media***
- 4. Traditional Media***

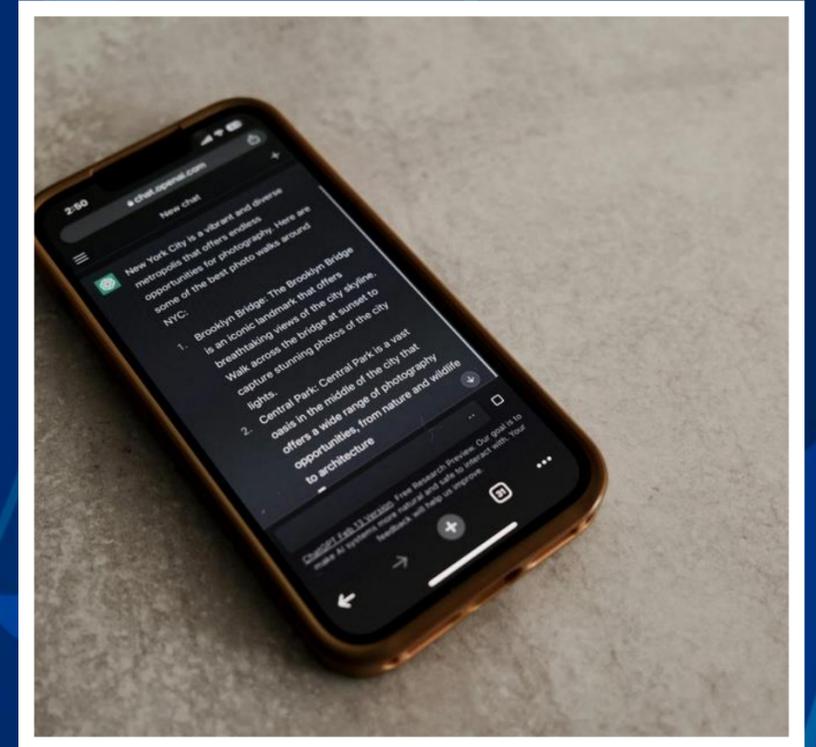
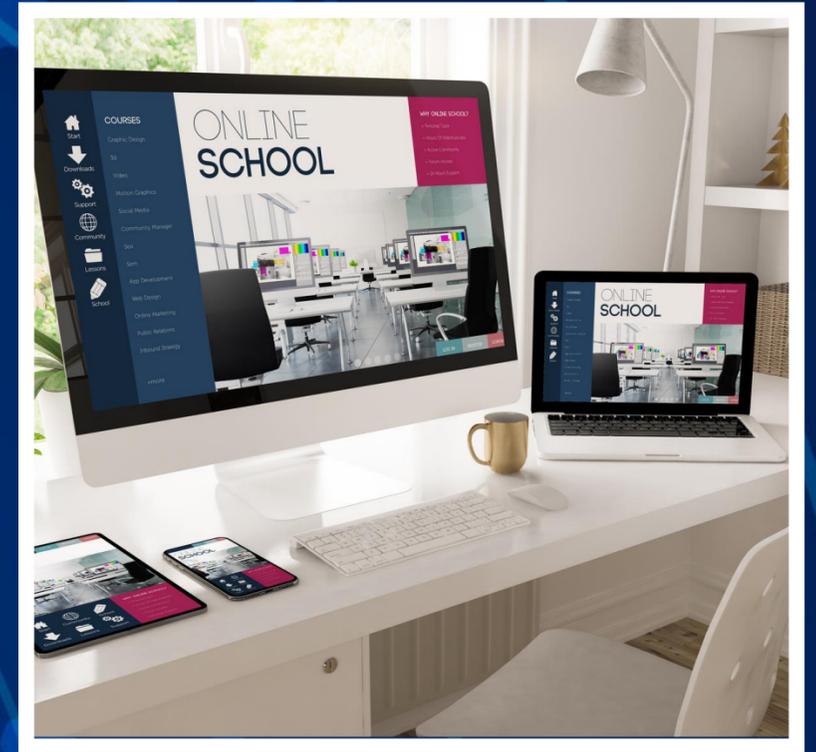


And it's not just emergency info...

Q: How do you prefer to receive essential, but non-emergency, school related information about your child's district?



Source: Apptegy/SchoolCEO





WHAT DON'T YOU SEE LISTED AS A KEY COMMUNICATION CHANNEL?

Traditional Media Still Important...

Benefits of Engaging with the Media

- Show leadership in a crisis
- Demonstrate transparency
- Reassure students, families and community
- Limit rumors and misinformation
- Communicate crisis response actions
- Show empathy for those affected



The Reporter Reality

- **Demanding Deadlines**
- **Multiple stories per day**
- **Being asked to do more with less**
- **Newsrooms are understaff;** *reporters are being asked to do more with less*
- **Journalists are sometimes undertrained, underpaid, and overworked**
- **Anything you can do to make their job easier will be appreciated!**



24-Hour News Cycle

4-7am - Morning Newscast

9:30am - Dayside Editorial Meeting

11-1pm - Midday Newscasts

2:00pm - Nightside Editorial Meeting

4-7pm - Early Evening Newscasts

9-10:30pm - Late Evening Newscast

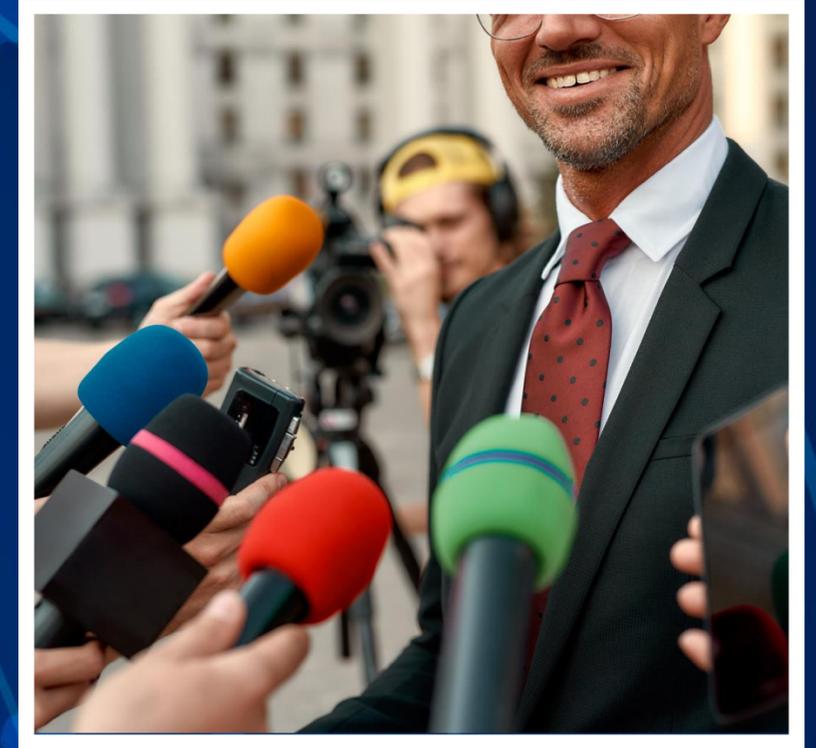
12:00-4am - Overnight Prep/Breaking News

4-7am - REPEAT!



Dealing with The Media

- Single best thing your district can do is **hire a PR or School Communication Professional.**
- More on “**why**” later.
- We recognize because of **budget constraints** thats not always possible.
- Regardless of staffing, sometimes the media will come directly to you, so you need to be ready.



RELATIONSHIP BUILDING WITH MEDIA MEMBERS

Help them help you!

- Answer their calls, texts, and emails
- Respond with fast, accurate information
- If you respond when there is bad news, reporters are more likely to respond when you have good news.
- Develop mutual respect for the roles you play; They don't have to be your enemy!
- Hiding from the press, solves nothing



CONTROL THE NARRATIVE!

Tell the story you want told

- Especially critical when it's bad news!
- Strategically select people to be interviewed

Tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!

- It's that middle one (the whole truth) that we sometimes have problems with...
- That's not to say you should lie or not be as transparent as possible.
- Too much detail can be dangerous (Legal, privacy, etc.)



THE GOOD, BAD, AND UGLY

Be the first to control the narrative...

- Most of the time, information is going to come out anyway
- This allows you to better control the story
- Sometimes if you don't release it, the public perceives it as your hiding something



Big No No!

Don't Speculate

Speculating can get you in **BIG TROUBLE**: Embarrassment, Legal, Professional

Instead say...*"I'm not going to speculate, but what I can tell you is..."*

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Table Top Exercise

- Take 5 Minutes and go around the table
- What is the craziest crisis story that happened in your district?
- Who did you communicate to and how did you communicate?



CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Response Best Practices

- Be transparent
- Be responsive/proactive
- Provide only known information
- Commit to a cadence of information
- Remember all who might be affected and their needs
- Effectively communicating in a crisis is the result of planning **before** the situation occurs



CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS GOALS

Goals:

- Reduce Misinformation
- Assert leadership voice
- Reassure community safety
- Coordinate with emergency crews or experts
- Communicate crisis response: action, prevention, protection.



COMMUNICATING WITH THE MEDIA

Determine in Advance:

- Spokesperson - Superintendent, Board President?
- Practice messaging to convey it professionally/succinctly
- Written vs. on camera statement
- Chain of approval; what situations do you need to involve legal?
- Establish a media policy for on campus visits
- Where to stage media on site for a large event.



The Anatomy of the Soundbite

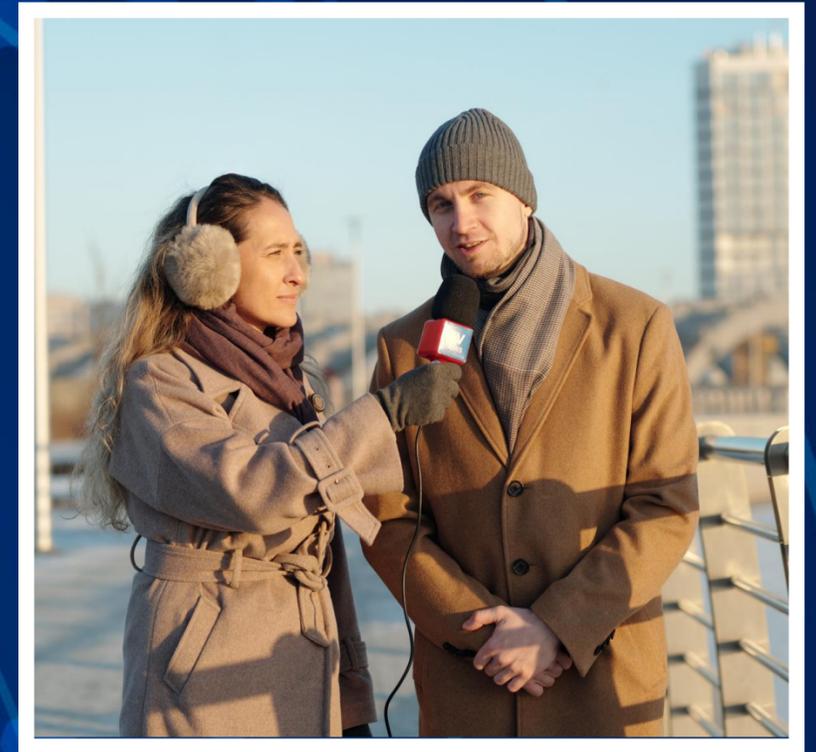
The 8-second rule: *The average length of a TV news soundbite has shrunk from 43 seconds in the 1960s to roughly 8-9 seconds today.*

Be Concise: *Say what you need to say in 20-25 words or less*

Conversational is Key: *No jargon or EDU talk no one outside education understands*

Beginning, Middle, and End:

- *Start by expressing empathy for those impacted.*
- *Share actions taken to protect people and prevent harm.*
- *Backsell your preventative steps*



Control the Interview

Stay on Message, Regardless of what is asked:

- Prepare **3-5 talking points** and stick to them.
- **Repeat, repeat, repeat** your key messages.
- Make your point, **stop talking**. Wait it out!
- If it's not under your purview, don't answer the question and **refer the reporter to the correct source**: "That's a question for the police department."



Control the Interview

No Comment, Not an Option:

This phrase sounds like “I’m guilty” or makes it seem like you have something to hide (even if you don’t); Instead explain why you can’t answer

“I’m not able to discuss that because of student privacy laws.”

Fun Fact: Ain’t No Such Thing as “Off the Record”

Unless you have a pre-existing, ironclad agreement with a trusted journalist, assume **everything** you say - including small talk before and after the interview - is fair game

Control the Interview

You don't have to answer every question directly

- ***Never Speculate***
- ***Refer the reporter to the proper source***
- ***It's ok to say: "I don't have that information" or "I will have to get back to you with that information."***
- ***Don't repeat negative phrasing in your answer.***





**CONTROL THE INTERVIEW:
USE BRIDGING STATEMENTS**

Bridging Statements

The ABC Rule:

- **Acknowledge the question** A brief, honest response (even if it's just "I understand your concern").
- **Bridge to your topic:** The transition phrase.
- **Communicate your message:** Your pre-planned point; again this is your opportunity to **stay on message** and **control the interview**



Bridging Statements

“It’s imperative that we remember...”

“What’s important is that...”

“Let me emphasize that...”

“Our record demonstrates that...”

“What we’re focused on is...”

“That’s the main reason that we’re...”

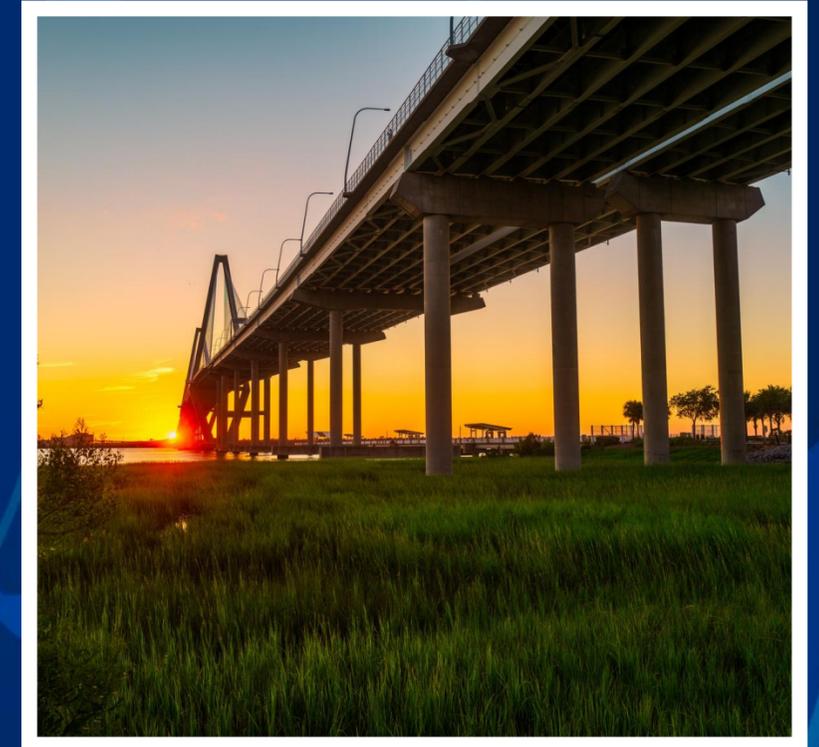
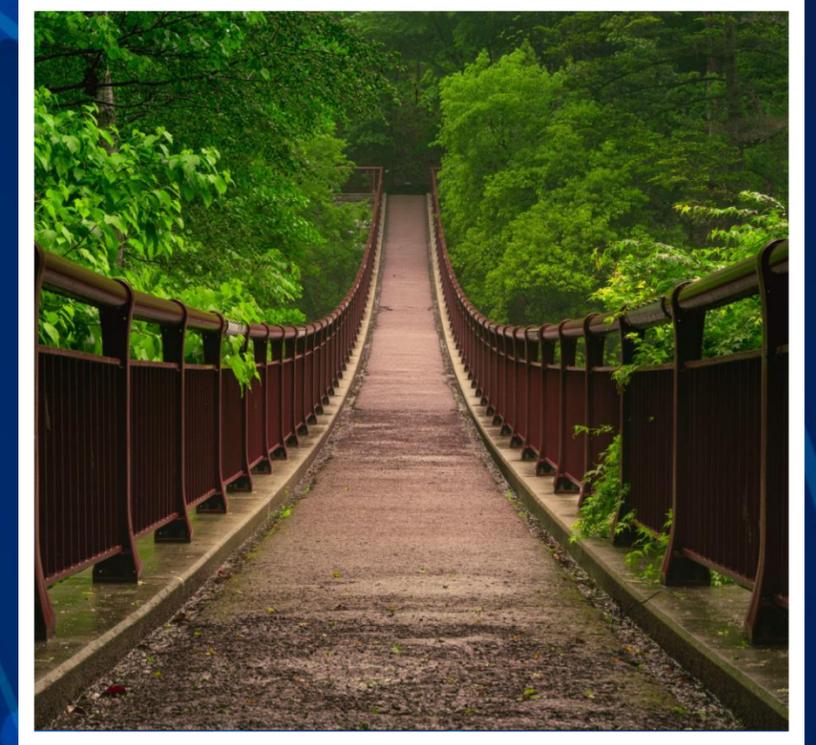
“Let me reiterate that...”

“However...”

“It’s important to note that...”

“The key issue is....”

Note: *Bridging statements can be used in on-camera interviews and written statements....*



Bridging Examples

Reporter: "Isn't it true the school district waited too long to call the snow day?"

The Bridge: "I understand the frustration with timing, but the most important factor is that we made the decision based on the safety of our 5,000 students."

Reporter: "Why is the football stadium renovation costing so much more than expected?"

The Bridge: "Budgeting is always a complex process; however, the real value of this project is the long-term safety and accessibility improvements for our entire community."



4-Step Response Formula

Acknowledge → Answer → Pivot → Reassure

Example:

“I understand why parents are concerned. The board takes safety seriously. We regularly review our policies and hold administration accountable. Our priority is making sure every student feels safe.”





LIVE PRACTICE

WARM-UP EXERCISE

Background

Your district has just announced:

- *Graduation rates increased by 6% over the past two years.*
- *Third-grade reading proficiency improved by 8%.*
- *Chronic absenteeism dropped by 10%.*
- *The district launched a new literacy initiative two years ago.*
- *Teachers completed additional professional development tied to reading instruction.*
- *The superintendent credits “collaboration across the district.”*

****A local TV reporter just wrapped up an interview with the superintendent and catches you on the way out and wants to grab a quick interview with you.***

WARM-UP EXERCISE

Write Down (3 Minutes)

- *One headline sentence*
- *One supporting detail*
- *One forward-looking statement*

Remember: 30 seconds max.

Table Share (3 Minutes)

At each table:

- *Volunteers read their 30-second answer.*
- *Table votes on the strongest one.*

**Live Interview
Feedback**

Scenarios – In Action **Step by Step**

- 1. Break into groups of 5-6*
- 2. Read the prompt and work on developing a possible response*
- 3. Write down on a worksheet 4-5 questions that you want to be asked and 1-2 questions you don't want to be asked. (No more than 10-15 minutes...the idea is create a sense of urgency)*
- 4. Craft your responses*
- 5. Partner up and practice Q&A in table top exercise*

Scenarios – In Action

Step by Step

On Camera Interview:

1. Pick a spokesperson from the group. *(This person will go into the hall and be interviewed on camera.)*

2. Feedback & Discussion

REMEMBER: *This is not done to call anyone out. No one is expected to be perfect, but it does help to learn together.*

Scenario #1

Budget Reductions Under Public Pressure

Background:

- *The district is facing a \$5.8 million shortfall due to declining enrollment and reduced state funding.*
- *The board voted 4–3 to approve a balanced budget.*
- *Reductions include 15 positions (primarily through attrition and non-renewals).*
- *Average class size may increase by 1–2 students.*
- *A parent group is organizing a rally titled “Protect Our Classrooms.”*

Scenario #2

Rezoning & Community Backlash

Background:

- *One high school is at 118% capacity; another is at 65%.*
- *The board approved rezoning impacting 400 students.*
- *Three public hearings were held.*
- *A petition with 2,000 signatures opposes the change.*
- *Some parents claim property values will drop.*

Scenario #3

Superintendent Contract Renewal

Background:

- *The superintendent's contract extended three years.*
- *Evaluation rated "Meets Expectations."*
- *Academic growth modestly improved.*
- *The vote was 6–1.*
- *Community feedback is mixed.*

Scenario #4

School Safety Incident

(Weapon Found, No Injuries)

Background:

- *A student brought a weapon to campus.*
- *Another student reported it.*
- *School safety protocols were followed.*
- *No injuries occurred.*
- *Student has been disciplined per policy.*

Scenario #5

Transparency & Executive Sessions

Background:

- *Community members claim the board makes decisions “behind closed doors.”*
- *The board recently held multiple executive sessions for legal and personnel matters.*
- *All votes were taken in open session.*

Scenario #6

Staff Arrest & Policy Review

Background:

- *A staff member has been arrested on serious criminal charges unrelated to students.*
- *The employee has been placed on administrative leave.*
- *Law enforcement is investigating.*
- *Community members are questioning hiring practices.*

Board Best Practices *When Dealing with the Media*

Be on the same page: *whenever possible present a united front in public*

One drum, one beat: *know who is going to speak on behalf of the board*

Talk to neighboring districts: *Many times you will have the same issues, how are they handling the response*

Use Professional Organizations: *AASB, SSA, NSPRA, ALSPRA*

For Major Communication Efforts: *Contract with a firm or hire a school communications professional where financially feasible*

The Benefits of a School Comms Professional

Specially Trained: Just like other professions, school PR/Comms practitioners have been specially trained in best practices and/or many times have real world experiences.

Pass it off to them: When a reporter calls, you can say “Thanks for calling, why don’t you talk to my communications director. They would be best equipped at helping you.”

Conduit of Information: Your communications director can also keep you informed with behind-the-scenes happenings in the district.

Communications is Key: Effective communications is essential for a strong school district. **It makes sense to have someone leading those efforts.**

Don’t look at it as hiring a publicity manager or a spin-doctor: True **school communicators** are strategic thinkers and can serve as key advisors for complicated communication efforts. Many times they serve on the superintendent’s cabinet.



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