

**Somerset County Board of Education
Administrative Guidelines
Policy # 800-9**

POTENTIAL REVISION-SUBMITTED 8/21/12

PUBLIC INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

The Board of Education believes that effective communication with the public is a significant element of effective school system operation. To this end, appropriate avenues of communication will be utilized and encouraged.

An effective communication program should contain the following including:

1. the designation of a staff member to serve as a Public Information Officer (PIO) to communicate with the media and general public as part of established Crisis Management procedures and to inform the media and general public of positions and actions taken by the school system for other situations and events;
2. timely response to inquiries or statements of concern from members of the public and media;
3. all information distributed to the public should be accurate. Press releases and news advisories should be distributed in a timely manner. The definition of timely manner will vary with the type of release or advisory.
 - (a) Information pertaining to a pending Board or school meeting in which key information will be discussed or important decisions rendered should be disseminated to the news media no later than seven to ten work days prior to the meeting (s).
 - (b) For a crisis situation within the school system, press releases and news advisories should be distributed within one to two hours after the occurrence. The Public Information Officer (PIO) will provide accurate information to the news media after collaboration with the crisis management team. If the PIO is absent, the Supervisor of Secondary Education will assume PIO responsibilities followed by the Supervisor of Human Resources.
 - (c) Press releases and news advisories pertaining to programs, practices and achievements should be released to the news media no more than seven to ten work days prior to or after programs, practices or achievements.
4. development and maintenance of public relations standard operation procedures which will contain an overall marketing plan, to be updated as directed by program evaluation;
5. development of administrative protocols for proper interaction with the media;
6. establishment of a media advisory board and a community relations committee;
7. program development for recognition of staff and students serving as internal and external public relations;
8. interaction with businesses, civic groups and charitable organizations to continue to foster strong community relations;
 - distribution of press releases, media advisories, Board meeting summaries, school calendar handbooks, multiple brochures, newsletters, digital marketing, and periodic reports;

- opportunities for individuals or groups to make comment to the Board; and;
- efforts at the school level to keep the school's public aware of current matters of interest. Such activities will include parent-teacher conferences, newsletters, school improvement teams, parent visits, the use of technology such as the Worldwide Web and e-mail, establishment of school-based media contacts, and information meetings.

The Board will report data on the achievement of its goals and objectives, educational achievement, and graduation rates to the public on an annual basis. Data concerning a specific school building may be sent to parents of students in that building.

The Superintendent will develop procedures and techniques for ensuring a continuous and free-flowing line of communication between the staff and the community. Program evaluation will be established.

**Public Relations Practices and Protocols for
Administrators and Supervisors
Office of Public Relations
Somerset County Public Schools
September 19, 2012**

BOE POLICY 800-9-“The Superintendent of Schools will be responsible for initiating and administering a continuous program of communication within the community. The superintendent will make use of appropriate school personnel and all available media in discharging this responsibility.”

PLEASE NOTE- These guidelines are essentially appropriate for the entire A&S staff and other appropriate staff members. Insert director/supervisor/ appropriate staff member where principal is stated. Central office can be used instead of schools.

A. Guidelines To Be Followed When Working With The Media

Positive Media Coverage at Schools

At all times the news media representatives should make contact with the Somerset County Public Relations office to visit schools for interviews for positive routine school news or a crisis situation. The Public Information Officer (PIO) is responsible to speak to a media representative unless direction can be given to the principal to participate in the interview. The Office of Public Relations will assist the schools throughout the year and may be contacted for assistance by schools or the news media. All school press releases must be sent to the PIO for approval.

Hard News Media Coverage at Schools-Media Contact

When the news media inquires about a crisis, ethical problem, legal problem, student or staff misbehavior or any other serious situation, the office of Public Relations must be contacted initially by the media reporter who will meet with the PIO.

Media Request for Hard News Coverage at Schools-Prior Notification

If a principal has not received prior notification from the Office of Public Relations that a reporter was inquiring about a serious issue at the school and has been contacted by that reporter, the principal should contact the Office of Public Relations. The media representative will not be allowed to come to the school or the central office without permission from the PIO or the Superintendent.

Public Institution-Responsibilities

It is important to remember that the school system is a public institution, and it is inherent in the responsibilities of school administrators to cooperate with those who want to know what is going on in the schools. A school representative's reaction reporter is as important to the outcome of the story as is the material gathered for the news story.

Legal Rights of the Media

The press does have a legal right to visit our schools, but there are restrictions. They do not have a legal right to interrupt class, and no staff member, student, or parent is ever required to talk to the media. Media and the general public do not require permission, however, to be on the public sidewalks at schools. A principal may deny media access to a school facility if it would interrupt a scheduled activity/instructional program, judged not to be in the best interest of the students and staff or is a potentially controversial topic or sensitive issue. (Board Policy 200-21)

Media as Visitors

All visitors, including media, are required to check in at the front office. This is necessary to ensure student safety. When the media check in, they will be escorted at all times while on school property by an administrator or the PIO. (Board Policy 200-21)

Permission from Parents for Interviews, Photographs, Video for Television

If a media representative would like to interview, photograph or video a student, a media permission form must be filled out and signed by the student's parent or guardian prior to the interview. This permission form should be signed and in the office at each school. (Board Policy 200-21-Administrative Procedures)

Media Inquiries Pertaining to Students

Media inquiries about specific students, including inquiries in police-related matters or activities that have taken place off school grounds and not during the regular school day, should be referred to the Office of Public Relations.

FERPA

Any media inquiries that involve questions about specific students must be referred to the Office of Public Relations. Such inquiries must be handled in strict compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA.-Board Policy 600-33)

Media Inquiries about Staff

Any media inquiries about staff members should be referred to the Office of Public Relations.

Be Responsive To Media Requests

Being responsive to media requests will assist you in getting your share of positive coverage when you want it. If a media outlet contacts you, be responsive by either calling the Office of Public Relations to alert us of the call, or redirect the reporter to the Office of Public Relations. Talk to the reporter if it is about news that reflects well on your school or the school system.

Prepare For an Interview

It is always wise to prepare carefully for an interview. Try to anticipate questions and research the facts. Employees of Somerset County Public Schools are encouraged to respond accurately and forthrightly to questions asked by media representatives. Refer the media representative to another staff member if that staff member has greater expertise in an area.

Follow These Critical Interview Procedures

Be honest.

Avoid off-the-record remarks.

Do not argue with a reporter or lose your composure.

Do not allow a reporter to goad you into an inflammatory statement.

If you do not know the answer to a question simply say, "I do not know but will find out for you."

Be cautious of humorous responses; they usually sound funnier than they read.

Be certain you understand the question and the reporter understands your answer.

Avoid using complicated or technical language.

Do not repeat or reinforce negative or leading lines.

Stay on message.

Keys to A Successful On-Camera Interview

Determine two to three key points to make.

Speak clearly and keep your sentences short and to the point.

Do not use jargon.

Think before you speak.

Look at the reporter when answering questions.

Keep your eyes steady.

Anticipate questions and have answers ready.

Take a deep breath before speaking.

B. Managing A Crisis

Ensure Privacy

Remember, your first responsibility in an emergency is to the students and staff.

Personnel matters and student record information is not public information and should not be provided.

Grieving students should never be interviewed.

No student should ever be allowed to answer questions about his or her personal life, or feelings regarding sensitive issues.

Advise all students and staff not to comment on or off the record about an indiscretion of another student or employee, particularly a case involving litigation or criminal charges.

Control Access

As with all visitors, members of the media should be escorted by the principal or designee to prevent interference with the educational process.

Do not try to control interviews off of school property.

Control the Information

Only give the media the approved statement per the Office of Public Relations

Do not speculate on reasons why an incident may have occurred or who may have been responsible.

Do not exaggerate the facts.

Do not assign blame.

Never discuss any information regarding a student's cumulative or limited access file, or incident.

Never give the name of a student who may have been involved in a serious incident, on or off campus.

Do not small-talk. A reporter's job is gathering the news.

Be brief. Short, clear answers are the most effective in communicating an idea, especially for radio and television.

C. Building Media Relations

Have a Media Release on File for All Students

All students under age 18 who are photographed, videotaped, or interviewed must have a media release form granting parental/guardian permission on file. (Board Policy 200-21-Administrative Procedures)

Know, Respect and Observe Reporters' Deadlines

Provide plenty of advance notice. (No less than seven working days)

Do Not Stereotype all Reporters in One Category

Judge reporters on an individual basis according to the accuracy and balance of their stories.

Resist the Temptation to Tell Reporters How To Do Their Job

You do not have the right to read a story before it is printed or to see a tape before it is broadcast.

Maintain Statistics

News people love numbers. Keep statistics handy. Use them to illustrate your point.

D. Board of Education Policies That Make Partial or Total Reference to Public Relations

- Policy 200-21-Guidelines for Releasing School System & Individual Information
- Policy 500-14-Acceptable Use - Of Information Systems And Technology
- Policy 600-33-Regulations And Procedures Governing Education Records
- Policy 800-7- Community Involvement In Education
- Policy 800-9-Public Information and Communication
- Policy 800-10-Public's Right to Know