

Don't be a "deer in the headlights."

Make your contact with the media positive, professional and productive.

Here are some tips for when a reporter calls you, the chairperson of your Parent Advisory Council. Ideas to help you get your message across and, hopefully, be quoted correctly!

When a reporter first calls, ensure you find out their name and whom they are with. Also ask:

1. **What is the story and angle you are working on?** This could help you make relevant comments and prevent a big surprise when the article is printed, different from the context you commented on.
2. **Who else are you going to interview?** Can give you a clearer understanding of the context.
3. **What do you know about this issue?** You may have to give them background information.
4. **What is your deadline?** So you are not answering "under the gun".

Buy yourself some time – always tell them that you will call them back (in no less than 15 minutes). Use the time to think, make notes, or talk to another PAC executive for ideas.

Anticipate questions, write them out and script your answers. Write key messages – your agenda. Underline certain words to help you remember the main points. Be concise, quotable, conversational, easy to understand, and free of jargon.

Reporters are often looking for a 20-second "sound bite"; your comments will be edited, clipped, and reorganized. In most interviews, the reporter's question is not printed or aired and as a result your comments will read like a statement and not like the answer to a question.

1. Don't say anything you don't want to see on the front page. **There is no such thing as off the record.**
2. Keep your comments concise and controlled; don't ramble. When you have finished saying what you want to say, STOP talking. Don't let a pregnant pause cause you to keep going.
3. Personal opinion is dangerous ground. Don't use "I", respond on behalf of your PAC, "Our parents believe..."
4. Don't say "no comment" – it may feel like a slap in the face to a reporter.

Reporters are good at asking many different types of questions. Some are:

- straightforward, "How long have you been involved in the PAC at this school?"
- open-ended, "Tell me about the program."
- to bait you, "Do you agree this is just another cash cow?" Use a key message or repeat a previous answer rather than answering yes or no.
- asking you to speak for others, "What do you think the (principal, teachers, school board) will say about...?" A good answer could be "I can only speak on behalf of the PAC and parents have said..."
- speculative, "What do you think parents will think of...?" If your PAC hasn't discussed the issue, say so, rather than taking a chance of only giving your own opinion, instead of being representative.
- asking for your personal opinion, "What do you think about...?" Reply, "As the spokesperson for the PAC, I can tell you that parents believe..."

A reporter is likely to ask the same question several times. Keep your tone consistent. Repeat earlier answers or key messages patiently. Do not use phrases such as: “as I said before” or “like I said...” or “again...”

Try using one of these phrases to bridge from your answer to their question to your message:

- “...what’s really important here is ...”
- “...the public needs to know that...”
- “...the bottom line here is...”
- Avoid “however”, “but” and “in addition”.

Be good to reporters – they need you AND your PAC can use a positive relationship to enhance your work through free publicity. Be cooperative, polite and return calls promptly. Get your message across clearly – and good luck!